

Learning the Heart Way!

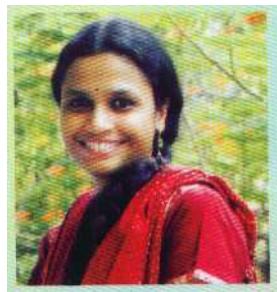
Samyuktha

Samyuktha's live-wire book, *Learning the Heart Way*, may dramatically alter the way young people think about college or university education in future.

Most youngsters would like to be free of the drudgery and boredom associated with college lectures, mouldy professors, sterile guides and endless examinations. Coming from an ordinary middle-class environment in Andhra, Samyuktha decided to opt out of the 'rat race of learning': the endless tests and scores; the straitjacket imposed by college disciplines which actually narrowed down the world of learning to mugging badly written texts of history, political science, economics, psychology, and yes, sociology; the endless chase after MBA degrees. Instead, she created her own 'higher education' curriculum, one that suited both her heart and mind. The result is a marvellous book on learning' as if the heart mattered'.

Other India Press and Multiversity are delighted to be associated with a publication that will be a source of inspiration and direction to many young people (and their parents) in these days of heartless learning and soulless education.

About the Author



Samyuktha was born in August 1978 in New Delhi and went to school at Kalakshetra, Chennai. She trained as a handloom weaver by working with weavers in Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh, and subsequently learnt textile design at the National Institute of Fashion Technology. She is presently working with an enterprise of handloom weavers in Pochampalli cluster in Andhra Pradesh. She volunteers with social organizations and dreams of a world that is just and sustainable.

Preface

Samyuktha's live-wire book, *Learning the Heart Way*, may dramatically alter the way young people think about college or university education in future.

It may not lead to large-scale desertions from university, but at least it is going to provide an attractive option that young people forced to go to college would never have

conceived of. This young woman not only ‘learned the heart way’, but collected a college degree as well. Now that is being able to live in the best of all possible worlds.

The serious problems affecting university education today seem to be largely self-inflicted, either by college managements or by the parents of students who attend these dreary institutions. The apathetic and lackadaisical attitude of college learners is largely a symptom of a more deadly illness for which they, in our opinion, should not be blamed. The Indian system of school education, in any case, renders them supremely incapable of taking decisions on crucial aspects of their lives or education as both teachers and parents dominate their day to day existence and insist on making all (or most) of their choices for them. Later, these include even proposals for marriage or job choices for life.

Few parents I know appear capable of solving the problem of getting their college children to take their academic studies seriously. The studies, first of all, are alien and mean mostly nothing to which the students can relate. University is not a learning place: it is simply a venue for mugging, a place where you study what the system decides for you. The system itself takes ages to change. I have been told that in places like the Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) in Delhi, it takes almost five years to change even a single book in the syllabus. Colleges and universities today are meant for people who have nothing better to do and wish to lie in a grave instead. In any case, college studies do not necessarily guarantee employment. Actually, they render the normal youngsters who enter their portals incapable of gainful employment.

Employers find it is fruitless and trying to hire people just out of college because these rarely have experience of doing anything competently in the real world. For reasons best known to itself, the university system decries experience, insulates students from practice and forces them to focus on predetermined text books and guides with little connection with the outside world.

In this context, *Learning the Heart Way* is quite exemplary.

Fresh out of school, this young girl from Andhra decided to break out of the pattern of attending a conventional college. Initially she was not clear about what exactly she wanted to pursue and learn, but she decided nonetheless that it was worth trying to find out what really excited her and gave her joy and a sense of satisfaction.

Timid and hesitant initially, Samyuktha soon found that it was challenging and stimulating to decide/learn from new situations as they presented themselves.

The decision to avoid formal college education created an enormous bounty: three years of quality time no longer frittered away on listening to boring 45 minutes lectures by persons who have largely become middlemen purveying dead knowledge printed in books. Freedom from college routines enabled Samyuktha to set her own time-tables, discipline herself on her own, learn to negotiate through interviews, select appropriate teachers, travel extensively, get involved in social and environmental issues and focus all her time, attention and energy on ‘schemes of the heart’.

In her case, she started out with a large basket of options from art, to dancing, origami, Indian music and working on looms. Eventually, after seriously sampling all these, she finally opted for further capacity building only in weaving, something that had always fascinated her.

During these years she registered for a distance education course with the Indira Gandhi Open University and succeeded in collecting a Bachelor's Degree with a gold medal as well. She thereafter applied via a normal competitive examination and was successfully admitted to the National Institute of Fashion Technology in exactly the field of her choice: textile design. So she successfully combined certification with freedom to learn as per her heart's desires.

What were the ingredients that enabled her to succeed?

First, parental support to allow such learning and to create the opportunities and situations that would advance such learning. If all parents would only get out of their children's' hair — as Naren and Uma, her parents, wisely did in Samyukta's case — we would have a boom in learning curves that would be of enormous benefit to growing societies like ours. Naren and Uma are not wealthy folks and their support to Samyuktha's learning journey was not akin to a rich daughter being allowed to do as she pleased whatever the cost. As Samyuktha herself discloses, the costs she incurred with her unconventional curriculum were never more than what a conventional student, attending a conventional college, would pay in any case; maybe, in fact, even less.

The second ingredient of success was to ensure that theory always followed practice.

In conventional university education students go through text books and theories for three years and then attempt to relate to the real world in terms of either finding a satisfactory role in society or soul-satisfying employment. The textbooks and courses enable them to fit neither. Since the subjects offered by universities are the same dozen wherever you go, there are any number of others possessing exactly the same limited skills that you have. They lack the special talent or creative urge that would make them either attractive to an employer or even enable them to set up their own business with confidence.

The dramatic emphasis on text book learning is seen clearly in the case of the MBA craze affecting both parents and students fresh out of college.

In economies or societies which are more mature, an MBA course is done generally after several years of working in a business environment. In India, as usual, this has been reversed since the Indian system legitimizes looting the unemployed under the garb of ever new certifications needed for successful employment. So people now collect an MBA degree as an additional qualification before they look for jobs. This has the paradoxical effect of limiting their thinking on problems they are going to face to the awful case studies and solutions they have to consume during the MBA course.

Samyukta's experience is neither unprecedented nor unique but it is the first to be so recorded. As parents ourselves, my wife and I had tried something similar with our own three boys when they faced going to university, so we watched Samyuktha's own journeys quite closely. All our three boys were advised, after they had been admitted, not to take either college or college examinations seriously, to restrain from attending classes whenever possible and to spend their three years developing their skills in areas in which they had a deep interest, natural inclination or attraction and which also gave them pleasure or joy. In the end, one son created his own niche as a herpetologist, another became a musician and the third, a little master of web design. They also completed their college degree at the same time confirming our conviction that learning for college

examinations for kids of normal intelligence should not take more than four weeks every year.

Samyuktha is now married and will be a mother by the time this book is published. She is not only pleased with how her own journey worked out, but happy that it qualified her in just the area she wanted. More and more parents should be inspired by her story to rescue their children as well from so-called institutions of higher education which have killed learning beyond recovery.

Claude Alvares
Other India Press and Multiversity

Foreword

Howard Gardner, invoking his famous theory of multiple intelligences, says, 'It's not how smart you are. It's how you are smart.'

Samyuktha, in her evocation of her learning through the Post School programme of the School (KFI) has with characteristic candour exemplified this fact. Her intelligence has allowed her to explore freely and sceptically the world that extended beyond her and this is evident in every line of her unique book. What also flows through in every small anecdote, every spontaneous perception, each gush of impressions, is the genuineness of her sharing, the sense of honesty and lack of presumption. It is also perhaps typical that she focuses so little on herself and so much on the people who taught her or interacted with her.

The range of learning opportunities she availed of, or created for herself, makes this small book a truly valuable acquisition for anyone looking for a place to begin. The search for a learning space, and then the glad exploration of it, underscores a bright and serious mind, capable of great creativity and equipped also with a deep social conscience. It has been a pleasure to interact with her, to share in part her dilemmas, her soul-searching questions, her vulnerabilities, her triumphs. Perhaps what she brought to me through the time that she was here, is best described by the fact that every interaction with her left me feeling more hopeful about young people, and also reinforced my faith in life's wisdom. The reason, I think, is that she, like her book, allowed for the mess of totality - the order, as her art teacher at the School, Tarit, would say, in chaos. The only true learning is organic, in the rare order of the moment, and Samyuktha seems to say, with Hugh Prather, 'Come walk with me in the mud...'

Sumitra Gautama
Counsellor and Guide,
Teacher, 'The School', KFI, Chennai

Introduction Why write this book?

There are many ways of doing things, whether it's making tea or the way you approach education. Choices and options — these make life exciting. Today, however, we have set patterns for everything, and especially so in the field of learning. Children must go to school. They must write exams. They must do well at studies. After completing school, they must get into a reputed college. And needless to say, they have to do well there too. With all these 'musts' they are bound to have a lucrative career - the purpose of the whole exercise anyway. The paths are clearly laid. We just must follow them. Don't turn. Don't look sideways. Just go ahead straight ahead. And you are sure to get there. That's what everyone believes or is made to believe - that there is one 'there' and that by following a process systematically, one will arrive there.

Higher education today appears to have only three faces: engineering, medicine or computers - Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva, the holy trinity of education. All of us have necessarily to mould ourselves and adapt to one of these manifestations. If you cannot become a Shiva, become a Brahma; if not, then a Vishnu. If you do not strive to become one of these, you are a fool. Perhaps there is something wrong with you. You must be a dullard, a dim-witted person. These are the complexes that invariably crawl into a student's mind. Parents are only too happy to see their children conform to these set patterns and do the 'same old things'. As they themselves did. Like their friends' children will do and are doing. Nobody wants to venture out into the open and say, 'I'll do what my heart says.'

The purpose of writing this book is to show to readers my age — yes, there are options. You can choose how you want to pursue your higher education; how you can work systematically towards realising your dreams, in areas of your choice, if you want to. In the process, you will learn about yourself, what you like the most and, finally, what really makes you happy. But this book is also to demonstrate to parents and students that there may be other interesting ways of going about this whole business of higher education. That we can dare to dream. Dare to think. Dare to be different.

In this kind of set up, you are the focal point. *You* choose to learn or not to. To listen or not to. To be friends or not to. Yes, *you* are the player and *you* are totally responsible. Blame or fame — it's all yours. *You* take complete charge of your education, your life, your self.

It was in this direction that I ventured; initially full of apprehensions and inhibitions - like most young students. And this journey is what I would like to share with the readers of this book. It does not elaborate on the subjects that I learnt, since not all are expected to have interests similar to mine. Rather, this is a book about the people who aided my perspective and thinking with their experiences and learning, and my interactions and encounters with them - with some masala to add zing to the stories.

Every system has its own advantages and disadvantages, and 'non-formal' education, as it is loosely called, is no exception. It may have worked well for me but may not work for everybody. But the idea is to share details of both the ups and downs. Perhaps, the reader may try out something new and utterly different. The process will always be fashioned and shaped according to circumstances, not necessarily in the way it happened with me. At least the mistakes I made might be avoided.

I. The beginnings of a journey

Every beginning is not really a beginning. The experiences of the past become the signposts of the future. If we are doing what we are doing, it is largely because of the kind of exposure one has had in the past. In my case too, that was an important factor.

Recalling Kalakshetra

Both my parents were trained in sociology. After quitting a bank job in Delhi, my father, Narendranath, moved with my mother, Uma Shankari, and me to Hyderabad to my paternal grandparents' house. My father started getting involved in social work, working for organizations like Lokayan, Andhra Pradesh Civil Liberties Committee (APCLC), etc., while my mother worked in the Institute for Public Enterprise (IPE), Osmania University.

After living in Hyderabad for six years, the idea of basing their social activities in a village and working at the grassroots appealed to my parents. Taking my grandfather, my younger sister, Lakshmi and me along, they moved again, this time to Venkatramapuram, our ancestral village in Chittoor district, Andhra Pradesh, to become farmers and to work in the social sphere. Since then my parents have pursued various objectives, mainly in the areas of agriculture, water management, land rights for Dalits, and the issue of untouchability. Over the last fifteen years, we have managed to bring most of our land under organic farming. We now grow organic mangoes, paddy, sugarcane, groundnut, coconut and seasonal vegetables.



WITH BAG AND BAGGAGE..

Shortly after my parents shifted to the village, I was enrolled as a residential student at the Besant Arundale Senior Secondary School (BASS) in Chennai which is a sister-unit of the Kalakshetra Foundation - a premier institution for training in *Bharatanatyam* (Indian classical dance). Kalakshetra was established by Smt. Rukmini Devi Arundale, the famous classical dancer. She evolved a unique style of *Bharatanatyam* and Kalakshetra became an abode for classical dancers and musicians. Rukmini *attai* loved children and laid emphasis on a tension-free, friendly learning atmosphere and on an education which focused on the virtues and values of Indian culture. In fact, the atmosphere of the place reminded me of the ancient Indian residential schools that we

read about - the *gurukulas*, I spent eight years (from 1989-1996) as a residential student at Kalakshetra.

Kalakshetra was a school with a difference. The day started with a morning prayer in a circular open space, laid with slabs and surrounded by trees. This space was called the *tapovanam*, in order to evoke the atmosphere of sages performing *tapas* (penance) in the forest. Interestingly, the *tapovanam* would be filled with prayers of different religions

- *Shamno Mitraha Sham Varunaba, Bismillah ir Rehman ir Rahim, and O Hidden Life.*

We sat cross-legged on the floor in thatch-roof classrooms, and sometimes under trees. The classrooms were designed with natural ventilation in mind, keeping us reasonably comfortable even during the hot, sultry summers of Chennai. Kalakshetra is located right on the sea shore and is visited by a constant breeze, accompanied by the sound of the waves. We wore full skirts and blouses when we started and only after class VIII, 'graduated' to *pavada-thavanis* (half-sarees), the traditional dress of Tamil Nadu. The boys wore *kurta pyjamas*. The teachers were very friendly and affectionate, and corporal punishment was not allowed. Students came from various cultures, traditions and backgrounds but mingled freely, without inhibition or prejudice, in a friendly manner.

Though Besant Arundale was a regular CBSE school, there was a lot of emphasis on dance and music. Most students went to the Kalakshetra Fine Arts College for an hour after school to attend one of the fine arts courses that were being offered — dance, painting, vocal music, *mridangam*, flute, violin or the *veena*. I completed a 5-year certificate course in *Bharatanatyam* and learnt classical vocal music for two years.



Kalakshetra used to hold an Art Festival (and several other festivals) every year, during which famous dancers and musicians would perform in the magnificent Kalakshetra auditorium. Especially memorable were the Kalakshetra dance dramas, composed by Smt. Rukmini Devi herself and performed by trained dancers and musicians from the institution. This emphasis on the arts in Kalakshetra nurtured in us a deep and lasting respect for India's arts and crafts. I learnt to appreciate truly the essential Indian aesthetic that successfully combines beauty and simplicity. I owe all this and much more to Kalakshetra.

Completing school

Towards the end of my class XII, while my friends were busy filling applications for engineering and medicine, I sat lost in thought under one of the large sprawling trees on our hostel campus.

‘What should I do?’

‘What do I want to do?’

The only thing I was sure of was that I didn’t want to do either engineering or computers. Too boring...

I loved biology (we had a wonderful teacher), but not blood. So medicine too was not for me.

Beyond this, taking a decision was not easy because I was interested in so many things!

Perhaps a B.Sc in biology?

‘But who will sit and study for three long years? And what will I do with a B.Sc.? I liked crafts. I enjoyed doing things with my hands (and feet)!

‘Music, dance, painting?’

‘And theatre? Yes!!’

But was I good at it?

‘Perhaps I should become a lawyer.

My thoughts darted from one profession to another. What am I good at? What is really worth pursuing seriously? Which profession will pay well? Where does a good future lie? But above all, *what would I really like to do?*

Sitting under the tree. I wished that some leaves from heaven would simply fall angelically into my hands, with answers to all my questions written on them. And then I would simply get up, dust the sand off my clothes and rush off, ‘Eureka!! I’ve found it!!’

However, that did not happen, and worse still, this was just the beginning, the tip of the iceberg. It helped that, unlike at many other schools, it was not drilled into me that getting super-high test scores followed by dozens of entrance examinations should be my single all-important goal. My parents heard me out through my dilemmas and we had a lot of discussions, weighing the pros and cons of every profession vis-à-vis my interests. Finally, they suggested that I take a year off, travel and explore options. In the process of ‘looking around,’ I could also spend time doing some real work in a few areas of my interest. After that I could choose what I would like to do to earn my *annam* and *pappu* (daily meal of rice and pulses).

Great idea! It was in just this state of mind that I read *Free from School*, a book by Rahul Alvares, a student who ‘took off from academic studies for a year after class X and involved himself with activities he enjoyed doing most. He loved the animal world and the reptile family — snakes in particular! All his experiences in practical learning with reptiles were contained in this little book. This encouraged me all the more and provided me with the ‘kick-start’ I badly needed.

So how does one start off? Play around a bit? That’s precisely what I did.

Playing around

So while other young people my age dutifully registered for colleges and classes, my first destination — with my mother accompanying me — was Ahmedabad. Sudarshan Khanna was a professor of industrial design at the National Institute of Design (NID) which is located in that city. Teaching he definitely did, but he found time for something else as well... he was a great toy maker! Sudarshanji has researched extensively on traditional Indian toy-making and has conducted many workshops in schools for children, both in India and abroad. He even organized a workshop on indigenous toy-making during the Congress on Traditional Science and Technology Conference held at the Anna University in Chennai. That was how my mother came to know about him. She wrote to him and he agreed to teach me how to make toys.

We stayed with Sudarshanji for about two weeks, and I learnt to make all kinds of Indian toys with a variety of materials — paper, clay, straw, metal, etc. Simple they seem and look, but sit down to make them and you will realize how difficult ‘simple’ really is. These toys produce their unique visual and sound effects only when you make them accurately. Making these toys helps you understand some basic concepts of science. A little carelessness from the maker and the toys will just not work! Simple, but stubborn toys I called them. A slightly bigger hole, a hole a wee bit off centre, a thinner or thicker paper than that required, clay that is just a little too wet - and you can be sure that you are in for a disappointment: the toy will simply refuse to perform.

When you stare understanding the moods of these stubborn creatures you really appreciate the toy craftsman who has understood how to make these ‘playful children’ behave. Most of such toys are made in rural India by children themselves with scrap picked up from the streets and from other naturally available materials. Who has given them such an intuitive understanding of science? Are they even aware that they possess it?

Sudarshanji’s two daughters, Surbhi and Girija (then about 12 and 10 years old) were already masters at making toys and they became my tutors as well. Often, when I was left wondering why the toy I had made did not work, pat would come the reply from Surbhi, ‘*Yeh bahut mota ho gaya didi.*’ (This has become too thick, sister!)’ Sometimes both of us would fail to make a ‘bird’ behave, and we would then have to go to Sudarshanji for his expert advice. On every New Year’s Day since then, the Khannas have been sending me a toy as their greeting card!

While in Ahmedabad, we visited the famous Calico Museum of Textiles. The institution is a brainchild of Gira Sarabhai, and houses some exquisite and rare collections of Indian textiles from different parts of India, some dating back to the seventeenth century. We went on a guided tour of the place and the textiles held us spellbound with their intricate workmanship, colour and beauty.

One evening we visited Gandhiji’s Sabarmati ashram along the Sabarmati River, which today flows like a ditty drain. The calm and quiet atmosphere of the ashram bears a striking contrast to the hustle and bustle of the street just outside the gate, as if they are two different worlds, unmindful of each other. The ashram, set up in 1915, has been witness to many historic events during India’s freedom struggle. It was a humbling experience just to feel the cool floor against your bare feet. We also saw many articles which had been in daily use when Gandhiji lived at the ashram — the writing desk,

mattress, utensils together with some of Gandhiji's manuscripts, photographs and letters. My eyes fell on a little, really cute, blue-velvet purse with an embroidered flower that Gandhiji had gifted to Kasturba.

From Ahmedabad, we went to Baroda where we stayed with Anand Kumar. Anand uncle is a friend-philosopher-guide to many people including my mother and she thought it might be a good idea to gain some wisdom from him as well. Always clad in spotlessly clean, pressed *kurtas*, Anand is one of the most cheerful people I have ever met. We had long chats with him about my career plans. There is one conversation that I recollect very vividly. As we sat sipping tea, he said, if you take two glasses, one with water and one without... and keep pouring water from one glass into the other for six hours a day, for say, a full year... it's a simple thing. But you will learn all that it takes between you, the glasses, the water and the action of pouring water from, one glass to another. You may not be able to articulate that learning but you would have learnt a lot by then. So anything you do requires a certain amount of time and systematic effort for you to understand the act completely and holistically. You may then decide to continue with it or to stop it.' This was a very important piece of advice and since then, I have tried to put it into practice.

On the day I was visiting the M.S University in Baroda, my mother simply dropped me at the gate and told me to get all the information I needed and find my way back home. There I was, all alone, and I didn't know a soul. Having grown up in a protective residential school, this was the first time I had to venture into a new place without being accompanied by an elder.

I went into a room that seemed like the office, introduced myself as someone who wished to see the campus and know about the courses being offered. I then went from department to department - pottery, sculpture, fine arts, visual communications, etc., met students and teachers who were working in the classrooms (since it was vacation period, they had a little free time) and collected a few brochures and the prospectus. I was happy with my day's work and reported everything in minute detail to my mother when I got back home.

Two days later, we left Baroda for Mumbai. Since I was planning a month-long visit in Mumbai, my mother decided to return to our village after dropping me at the home of her friend Rajni Bakshi. Rajni aunty is a freelance journalist who wrote the Creative Quest column for *The Hindu*. She is also the author of *Bapu Kuti*, a popular book among young social activists. My reason to stay awhile in Mumbai was to get acquainted with people in different professions and to understand how they got on with their lives. What better place for such a programme than Mumbai, the most diverse and cosmopolitan city in India?

Rajni aunty was a sheer pleasure to stay with. The best thing about her is her capacity to completely transform herself and relate on an equal footing with just about anybody. One second she would be 'coo-cooing' to a giggling baby and the next she would be involved in a deep intellectual conversation with a friend on the teachings of Swami Vivekananda. A very good actor, she always kept you in splits of laughter. She helped organize all my visits in Mumbai.

We met the famous Carnatic vocal musician Aruna Sayeeram. My mother had seen her perform in dancer-choreographer Chandrakala's production, *Bhinnna Pravaha*. She

said she was so moved that she simply went up to her and hugged her. *Amma* was very keen that I meet her during my stay in Mumbai.

Arunaji was excited about this whole idea of educating myself in a different way and spoke to me about her daily routine and *riyaz*, the rigorous practice required for serious classical musicians. She liked all kinds of music — pop, rock, western classical, film, jazz — everything! She had been to Germany to undergo training in voice culture. She has a rich, deep voice and has also worked with German musicians in one of her fusion productions.

Explaining her voice culture training, she said, “the confidence I had in singing inside the bathroom was never the same when singing before an audience.”

Did singers really feel that their bathroom singing was better? I thought it was a common statement made only by non-singers! ‘I wanted to build that confidence in my voice,’ she added. She asked me to sing. The famous Aruna Sayeeram was asking me to

‘What shall I sing?’ I could already hear my heart going off in its own *ralam* (rhythm).

Anything— anything you feel comfortable with,’ she said. ‘Classical, semi- classical, film..?’

‘Sing one of each,’ she laughed.

I sang a Tyagaraja *kriti* in Kalyani *ragam*, a Sai *bhajan* and the title song from the film, *Dil hai ki manta nahi*. I am not sure whether I felt’ more thrilled or embarrassed when she said that she liked ‘*Dil hai ki manta nahin* the best! From then on, she has been sending me an invitation to all her concerts in Chennai.

Painting was a hobby I had always enjoyed, and I wanted to see what the life of a painter was like. I met Preeti Kannan, who was a young professional painter in her late twenties. She had already held a few exhibitions in India and abroad. Though I was meeting her for the first time, we got along extremely well and I spent two days with her. She is a very energetic person and her interests range from making food, to fitness training, to reading. Her husband was working for Ramgopal Verma Productions and was out on some assignment. We found ourselves happily indulging in *filmi* gossip about the latest hit *Rangeela*.

She was working on her paintings which were to be exhibited soon in a gallery in the United States. This series of paintings didn’t have any images. They were an interplay of colours created by brush strokes to give an illusion of depth. I was thrilled when I too got a chance to paint a small portion of her canvas! She talked to me about colours and demonstrated how certain colours seem to be going ‘in’ and some seem to be ‘popping out.’ She also gave me her views on the art scene in India and in the west, and what it means to ‘stick it out’ as an amateur artist.



'In an exhibition that I visited in the U.S., there was one painting. A huge canvas painted completely black with a small star in white, titled "The lonely scar." And... can you guess the price on the tag? 30,000 US dollars! Can you imagine?' she exclaimed.

She said she would put me in touch with one of her artist friends in Chennai if I were really interested in learning art, and gave me his phone number.

Like any youngster I was also tickled by the tinsel world, of which Mumbai was the nerve-centre. How could I miss out on that? So off we went to a studio to watch the shooting of a Hindi serial being produced by Nimbus Productions. Rajni aunty knew the producer. The set on which they were shooting the serial had a bedroom, a drawing room, a police station and even a jail — all under the same ceiling with 'revolving' walls that could turn the bedroom into a prison in seconds! The scene that was being shot that day was on the prison set. The director, with his assistants, sat in another room in front of three computers. Each computer showed the actor from different angles and I was told that after shooting the scene they would choose the one that came out the best. Every aspect of the shot was constantly monitored and the actor was trying his best with every retake. Sometimes he was over-dramatic, sometimes he underplayed his emotions, or he would simply forget the dialogue and say, 'Sorry, sir. *Ek aur baar, sir* (One more time, sir).'

The train scene from the film *Pakeezah* and a few scenes from *Mughal-e-Azam* were shot in this very studio. The dummy trains and the dummy village were all there — dumb witnesses to the many famous film scenes and actors of Hollywood. Shooting a film is a mammoth affair in which every single person — from the spot boy to the main artist — contributes at the right time and place. It is ironic that after all the hard work most films produced today are of quite poor quality. And of course, there is always the risk of the film failing at the box office. We thanked the producer for the experience and drove back.

'Shall I fix up an appointment for you with Aamir Khan?' Rajni aunty asked, with the phone in her hand almost as if he would be on the line the next moment.

I was too excited and nervous to say anything. 'Oh God! What will I do? What will I say to him?'

'Bad luck! He has gone abroad,' aunty said, banging down the phone.

'Really? Bad luck,' I said, though I breathed a sigh of relief!

For many days after that incident, I imagined and enacted in my mind the scene of meeting my dream hero!

One fine day, Rajni aunty took out her ‘ancient’ typewriter and gave me a book ‘Learn Typewriting.’ And there I was, learning to type on my own, regularly practising the exercises for an hour every day. That basic skill that aunty thoughtfully initiated me into has been extremely useful.

Mumbai gave me the opportunity to experience many ‘firsts’. I saw two plays - Hamlet in English at the famous Prithvi theatre (I was convinced that this guy Hamlet was a total mental case!) and a comedy in Hindi directed by Nadira Babbar. I also attended many Hindustani music concerts and enjoyed them all. It was in Mumbai that I first ate Mexican and Chinese food and of course the piping hot *batata* (not potato!) *vadas*.

Nasreen Fazalbhoy, a professor at Mumbai University and my mother’s friend from Delhi University, invited me to visit her farmhouse at Lonavla, a hill station near Mumbai. It was a lovely experience. Nasreen aunty also gave me my first macramé lessons when we were holidaying there. She taught me a few techniques, and I made a small wall hanging as a present for Rajni aunty.

After returning from Lonavla, we thought it would be a good idea to go to the Mumbai museum to learn about the history of Mumbai. We saw some photographs, sketches of old Mumbai and other artefacts, among many other things. I was truly surprised to learn that today’s Mumbai is actually a group of islands that were interconnected to make one land mass - Mumbai dry.

I loved every bit of my stay in Mumbai.

At the end of the month, my father arrived and we started on our way back home. We stopped to attend a meeting near Dahanu, a small town in Maharashtra. Harsh Mander, then an IAS officer, had called the meeting at a small tribal hamlet. Many of his ‘socially conscious’ friends in various fields, including my father and a few other IAS officers participated in the meeting. The main subject of discussion was the right to information. Aruna Roy and Nikhil Dey, the pioneers of the *Mazdoor Kisan Sbakti Sanghatan* (MKSS) gave a detailed and extremely interesting account of how they first went to the villages and mobilized villagers to demand the right to know where all the money and resources being sanctioned for the villages’ social welfare were disappearing. They also shared stories of the *jan sunwayis* (people’s hearings) in which the concerned government authorities were held accountable and had to face the villagers’ questions.

Dahanu itself has been the centre of a revolution. The Kashtakari Sanghatana, headed by Pradeep Prabhu and Shiraz Balsara, has been consistently working for over two decades to help the tribals in the area gain control over their forest resources.

We also had individuals from similar groups sharing their experiences at the meeting. The meeting was chaired by Shri. S. R. Sankaran, an unassuming retired IAS officer and activist who had worked for several decades for the empowerment of the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes. Sitting amidst such selfless, totally dedicated people was in itself a wonderful opportunity for me to observe them all, each working in his or her own way, planning their own agendas, yet drawing inspiration from each other.

‘Do you want to come with me? I need some help,’ Shiraz aunty asked, walking briskly ahead.

As we reached a particular hut in the village, she told me that the inhabitant was an old man in his eighties who had suffered a fracture after he fell down while boarding a train. He was admitted to a hospital nearby and they required his previous medical reports. We had to look for those reports in his tiny hut.

As we opened the rickety door, we stepped into a different world. This man, it seems, was extremely active and was always doing something or the other — surely his fracture episode was evidence in itself. His room was very neat and organized, with one cot and an old-time black and white framed photograph of himself on one of the walls. That was not all — he had framed calendar cut-outs of Gandhiji, Indira Gandhi, Radhakrishna, Jesus, and a tomb with a crescent moon and a star.

We began a frantic search for the medical reports. We pulled out the trunk and looked under his clothes and books. He seemed to be an avid reader, judging from the number of old books we saw in the trunk. After half an hour, we were almost on the verge of giving up as we still couldn’t trace the reports. This man seemed so organized. Would he not have kept his reports carefully?

And then Shiraz aunty found it. An empty deflated ‘Frooty’ pouch! Inside it, neatly folded, were the medical reports.

From Dahanu, I came back to our village with a ‘what next’ looming large over my head.

The School - KFI

As its name suggests, ‘The School’ intends to be the best learning centre that is. A non-residential institution, it is situated opposite the expansive Theosophical Society campus at Adyar in Chennai. ‘The School’ is one of several such institutions set up by J. Krishnamurti, a famous philosopher and thinker of the twentieth century. Teaching and learning in these schools is based on J. Krishnamurti’s ideas on education and on the personality development of the individual.

J.K., as he is still popularly referred to in discussions, believed that education must aim at making students think independently and at preparing them to take on the challenges of the world, in a sensitive, intelligent and humane manner. The emphasis in Krishnamurti educational centres is on creating an ambiance in which both the teacher and the student go through the learning process together, through constant dialogue, enquiry and discussion. Hence students are encouraged to introspect and question fearlessly. The teaching methods are very creative and teachers constantly evolve innovative methods to make routine subjects interesting to students.

One of the teachers from the School, Anantha Padmanabhan, happened to meet my mother and mentioned to her about a Programme for Higher Education (PHE) which they were planning to start. And it was at my parents’ suggestion that I find out more about this programme that I came to the School in June 1996.

The office building was a large one dating from British times. In one of the rooms sat the principal, Gautama, a lean, fair man with a bald head and a friendly smile. The doors

of his office were open to allow natural light and ventilation, but they also immediately conveyed to me a feeling of being welcome. We had a long conversation about the PHE programme. ‘Wow! Interesting,’ I thought when Mr Gautam had finished explaining the details.

The PHE, according to Mr Gautam, was an opportunity for ‘self-reliant’ students to educate themselves after class XII. A note prepared by the School explains the broad areas of the programme:

Area 1 - Philosophical — developing an understanding of what it means to be a human being in the light of Krishnamurti’s teachings. This area is explored through conversations and readings and by watching and listening to video recordings of the talks and dialogues of Krishnamurti. Supplementary reading of religious and philosophical material is also encouraged.

Area 2: Engaging in areas of personal and contemporary significance. The student is required to engage with and work in four or five different areas of interest through appropriate means such as reading, apprenticeship, travel and performance. The manner in which these interests are explored depends on the subject and the depth to which the student wishes to go. The intention of this course of study is for the student to locate avenues of profound interest and vocation, and find inspiration beyond merely pursuing a career.

Area 3: The student is required to complete a Bachelor’s degree by correspondence (distance education) in a subject of his or her choice. This study is to be carried out by the student with the resources that students themselves identify, and with suggestions from the School. The School takes no direct responsibility for the academic inputs.

Interesting... but for three years? What would I do for such a long time here while in the school? Since I was initially set on a ‘one-year-off’ programme, I had to think twice, although the new course was very much along the lines of what I wished to do. The time-frame was the problem. The Principal told me to think it over and to let him know my decision after two weeks.

What appealed to me most about the PHE was the opportunity to apprentice myself with teachers in areas of my interest, such as painting, weaving and pottery, which were being taught at the school. Could I use this opportunity for a year, without committing to the three-year programme? Gautam said that it was possible, but then, in that case, ‘they would not be responsible for me.’ It seemed that unless I took up the PHE programme, the School would not commit to providing me active guidance.

‘Should I enrol or not?’

Well, it is simply not possible to put in words what it felt like then to take just this one decision; to answer just this one question. As it was, the ‘one-year-off’ decision was already swimming against the tide. But to continue in this manner for three years?

‘What will I do for three years? Will I have enough to do? Will I really learn something worthwhile?’

Deep down there was fear and insecurity: fear of taking the journey on this unknown, lonely road and insecurity of what lay at the end of it. If I did join the PHE, it meant committing to it and tackling the fear and insecurity head-on. For every student these

were some of the most crucial and decisive years for building a career. Was I ready to risk it?

'Is it the right decision? Will it be good for me?

It was a terrible state to be in. I had discussions with my parents and some of their friends for almost fifteen days. I prayed a lot and once or twice even broke down, as I could stand it no longer. Finally I reached the end of the allotted time when I was to report to Gautam and to let him know of my decision. I could not sleep that night and as I lay on my bed thinking, I suddenly felt light and could feel warm tears rolling down my cheeks. I smiled to myself. The decision was made. I would go for it!



When buttermilk is churned, the thickening might start right at the beginning, but the butter appears suddenly. I guess something similar happened with me - my thoughts had been churning for such a long time that the 'butter' suddenly appeared, and there was no looking back.

I chose to start off with painting, dance, weaving, history and phys-ics, along with pursuing a bachelor's degree in life sciences (since I liked biology) through the Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU).

I went to my old school, Besant Arundale, to tell teachers about my decision. The best response I got was, 'Good... its something differ-ent. We wish you all the best.' Some of my teachers were not too happy about my choosing to do a degree by correspondence after all the good marks I had received in school, but they trusted me with my decision. My class XII teacher, Mrs. Malathi Accuthan, however, was very sup-portive. She would always enquire about what was happening with me whenever I went to meet my teachers in school. She would often tell me that It was good that I had chosen something different and that she al-ways gave my example (!) to her students when she spoke to them about career options and choices. She even said: 'Samyuktha, I have a feeling I am going to see you on T.V or read about you in the newspaper one day.'

2 A road of my own

Since the School was no n-residential, I had only two options — either to stay in a girls' hostel or with a family in the city as a paying guest. My parents were not keen on my staying at a hostel. That left open only the paying guest option.

As it happened, all these discussions had taken place in a small flat in Thiruvanmiyur, where a teacher couple — Rajalakshmi and C.N. Krishnan — live with their only daughter, Aarya. Raji aunty taught economics at Ethiraj college, one of the well-known women's' colleges in Chennai. Krishnan uncle taught electronics at the Madras Institute of Technology (MIT) at Anna University. To this little family of three came an addition in the month of June 1996. Usually additions to a family take the form of a new-born child, or a grandparent. ..but this was one of those rare households that decided to take in an 18 year-old!

Raji aunty and Krishnan uncle offered to host me for as long as I continued with the PHE. Devadutta, a close friend of Raji aunty, lived in a flat just above the latter. She was a professor of Tamil at the Mother Teresa University in Kodaikanal. The two friends were like one family. It was arranged that I would stay and sleep in Deva auntie's house, and eat at Raji auntie's house. Raji aunty staunchly refused a 'paying guest' arrangement. So my parents occasionally brought some seasonal agricultural produce from the village for the family. It was this generous offer from Raji auntie's family that helped me get started with the PHE.

Getting started at The School

The School is a fascinating institution. Everything about it is different — from saying prayers, to playing basketball, to the way the teachers teach, and even the way the lunch sessions are organized. If it is 'The School,' it's got to be different! That was my first impression of the School and it stuck with me till the end.

The School had students from kindergarten to class XII. Apart from regular academic studies, there was a lot of emphasis on extra-curricular activities. The last one hour every day was left for high school students (from classes VIII to XII) to pursue one of several different activities including painting, carpentry, pottery, weaving, singing, yarn-craft, etc. After every term, students could choose a different activity.

What do you do?

As a student of the PHE programme, I could join any of the on-going classes at the School and had to work out for this a schedule with guidance from Gautam *anna* (my counsellor) and with the teachers concerned. Therefore, for the academic subjects that I chose — physics and history - I used to attend regular classes along with the students of class XI and XII, but I could work out separate schedules with the weaving and painting masters. I was free to spend my time wherever I desired, to study the subjects of my choice, and was not required to attend school daily. However, as it turned out, I found myself going to the School almost five days a week, primarily because most of the subjects of my study were taught there.

Like all the others at the School, I usually took off during the vacations but always planned how I was going to spend them. Sometimes I did short apprenticeships or

travelled. Very often I would have to prepare for my examinations at IGNOU where I had already enrolled for the B.Sc. programme. My counsellor and guide, Gautam *anna*, monitored my work from time to time and insisted I submit a weekly report of my progress in subjects, reflections on incidents, Krishnamurti studies —just about anything that seemed important enough for me to share with him.

When I joined the PHE programme, Haritha was already in — she was its first student. She was doing her B.Com. by correspondence and had already plunged into her areas of interest which included weaving and gardening.

She was very positive about the whole course and seemed very en-thusiastic about anything that happened at the School. Somebody just had to say, ‘Hey, something is happening there... Why don’t you come, Haritha?’ ‘Sure. We will definitely be there,’ would be her immediate response and she would drag me along as well.

I was taking some time to get accustomed to the School. But Haritha and me hit it off together very well right from the start. We shared common interests and we used to have long, intense conversations on many issues. We worked together whenever possible, trying our best to make our schedules coincide. One day, we met a new girl who was planning to join the PHE. I remember that she was very interested in philosophy and plumbing! We saw her for two days but she stopped coming thereafter. I was just getting used to everything, thanks to Haritha, when disaster struck! Haritha had to leave the programme for some personal reasons. I was left to myself— all alone, once again.

The regular students were initially unconcerned about what I was doing in the School. Some curious middle school students wondered if I was an *akka* (elder sister) -that was how students addressed the teachers in the School, as *anna* and *akka* — but they seemed confused when they saw me sitting in classes where I was learning to weave or studying something else. ‘You are not an *akka* and you are not in class XII... then what do you do in our school?’ they would enquire. The older students did come to know about the PHE programme and a few of them would occasionally enquire about how things were going.

‘Do you like it?’ they would ask, with a curious expression on their faces. When I replied, ‘Yes,’ they looked at me as if I were a weird person to be doing something like this. There was some kind of an invisible barrier between the students and me. They never seemed to really include me in their activities or conversations. If I were in the same class with them, nearly all the students would totally avoid me. I tried in vain for three to four months to change this, always being the first one to start a conversation. They would politely answer all my queries but the conversation itself would come to an abrupt end thereafter. We never got any further. However, there were some students with whom a typical exchange extended to more than just a mere ‘Hi’.

It was during the lunch sessions that I actually got some time to interact with the students and teachers. All of us including the teachers had community lunch provided by the School. Students sat in groups which had a mix of different age groups and which were joined by two or three teachers. I was free to choose any table I liked. Gradually, I found myself preferring some tables over others. Interestingly, this was not due to any of the students who sat at a particular table, but the teachers. Many a time, I simply wanted to continue a conversation with a teacher with whom I had been interacting before lunch. Craft teachers like the weaving, carpentry and pottery masters (all Tamil-speaking)

usually sat together at the same table and I often joined them, almost instinctively, as if that were my place. I guess I felt most comfortable and secure in their company.

I loved the food that was served, in stark contrast to the frowns and total disinterest shown by some of the other students. To me, they always seemed to be eating so little that many a time I was hesitant to take a second helping!

‘Open House’ was a one-hour session held every month. It was meant for students and teachers to discuss ‘openly’ on a common platform various matters either concerning the school, personal issues, conflicts, etc. All the students and teachers along with the principal would get together for this one-hour meeting and I used to enjoy the discussions. Some student would ask why the school had a certain rule, or someone else would share her thoughts on how she felt when other students teased her about her language problem, or how she reacted to poor people on the street. The sessions were chaired by a student who would very deftly ‘handle’ both teachers and students.

Another activity that I did with some of the school students in the first year was beach cleaning. Every Sunday evening, a few students and teachers of the School would gather at the Besant Nagar beach. Each of , with a bag in hand, would go walking amidst people on the beach, picking up scraps of plastic, paper, styrofoam and metal. ‘Who are you? Why are you all doing this? Are you from some organization?’ many would ask. We would explain to them that we were school students and were doing this with the simple objective of keeping the beach clean. ‘Oh, I see. Very good. Here, take this,’ they would promptly drop their scraps into our bag instead of taking the trouble to go to the dustbin themselves! At the end of the session, we used to share these responses of the public with each other.

As the days became months, I started feeling more and more a part of the School. I also began attending some physics and history classes with the class XI students. I had often felt that these subjects would be far more interesting if I could read them at leisure with proper guidance and without the pressure of exams, taking time to understand everything clearly. However, I could not continue to attend these classes regularly due to time clashes with other courses. I found that I was not able to keep up with the rest of the class. To learn at my own pace, I discontinued going to classes altogether but started reading history and physics books at the library.

Though I started off initially with weaving, painting, dance, physics and history, by the end of the first year I had decided to focus on a few subjects instead and prioritize my available time. After my first year, most of my time was spent on weaving and related areas, and biology course work for IGNOU. Painting, vocal music and dancing took a lower priority in the following two years. J. Krishnamurti study, an important aspect of the programme, went on simultaneously during the entire PHE programme. However, there were a number of short apprenticeships, experiences and travels — learning origami, a trip to the Narmada Valley, working with a theatre production with the School’s students, a two-month stint with a weaver family in Andhra, and so on — all of which occurred at different times during the three and a half years of the PHE programme along with learning the basic subjects.

Peer pressure and the public

You might wonder how I put up with 'peer pressure'. Though I did not attend college like my other schoolmates, I never felt I was missing anything really valuable. When we would occasionally meet and share our experiences, some of them would remark, 'Wow! Interesting you are so free to do anything you like.' They would tell me about their exciting college life in turn — about new boyfriends, lecturers, ragging, inter-collegiate meets, etc. I enjoyed listening to them always, but never felt any urge to drop out of the PHE and join the mainstream again. Was I too proud to admit otherwise? I don't think so. Perhaps the idea that it was all too 'regular' made it uninteresting for me. In any case I was too busy being excited about all that I was doing at the moment.

During our initial conversations about the PHE, Gautam *anna* had once said to me: "These years after high school are the most crucial and energetic years of a student's life where the mind absorbs from the out-side world like a sponge. Why should you spend those years attending lectures — most of which you find boring — from nine to five every day, travelling to and from college, and spending hours together gossiping in the canteen?" This thought struck a chord in me and must have stayed at the back of my mind, assuring me that what I was doing was worthwhile.

There was one query, however, that I really wished I didn't have to answer. Often during a conversation someone would courteously enquire what I was doing. To avoid going into details, I would simply say that I was doing a B.Sc. in life sciences. The dreaded question that invariably followed was, 'From where?' expecting me to say 'Stella Maris' or 'Ethiraj'. I always felt a pinch of inferiority to respond that I was doing my B.Sc through correspondence. As soon as they heard this, their expressions would change. I felt I could almost read their thoughts. 'If she is doing her degree through correspondence, then there must be something wrong with her, isn't it? Perhaps she is bad at studies and could not get into a good college.' This hurt my ego. And so I would feel compelled to tell them my whole story, 'Actually you see, I am doing something called a Programme for Higher Education. In this....' By the time I finished, I can't say how the listener felt, but I used to feel a quiet sense of accomplishment.



As for my relatives, PHE was something that they had not heard of at all. But they trusted me and let me be. It was not something they would even consider for their own children, but they gave me all their support and introduced me to their guests with pride.

Those in my own village were content with the fact that I was pursuing a degree in Chennai. As far as they were concerned, I was doing a B.Sc. and that was good enough for them. Of course, it always had to be my father who would say, 'She is my eldest daughter. She is doing her B.Sc. through correspondence...' and my face would turn pink with embarrassment.

Initially, I think I was always looking for assurance from people that I was not wasting my time, and that I was doing something useful and exciting. But, as the months rolled by, I felt an inner assurance about what I was doing, especially since I found that it was thoroughly enjoyable. Ultimately, that mattered to me the most.

Brush strokes

'Good morning, Tarit *anna*.'

'Good morning, good morning... yeah...Good morning. So you have come. Good.. Very good,' Tarit *anna* would say looking up from his scribbling pad. And this was invariably how Tarit *anna* would greet anyone.

Within the School, Tarit *anna* and the word 'art' are synonymous. Wherever you see art, there is a Tarit' behind it. Tarit Bhattacharya is a product of Shantiniketan. He has evolved an entire new idiom to define what art can mean to children. There is a famous story told about him:

Tarit *anna* once asked children to make something with clay. The kids at once started kneading the clay into various shapes.

'Hello, Pragathi. Your bird is looking very nice.'

'*Anna*,' the little girl frowned, 'This is a missile.'

'Oh, is it? Very good. Very good.'

But there was one boy who seemed totally disinterested in the whole exercise. What he really liked was throwing things around — crayons, colour pencils, everything. However, Tarit *anna* didn't give up. He gave the child some clay and placed a board covered with white paper right in front of him. "Throw clay on the board," said Tarit *anna* and left the child to himself. The child looked suspiciously at the paper at first, but decided to do as he had been told. It was, after all, what he enjoyed doing most in art class — throwing things. So he began throwing clay at the paper. Of course, the splashes of clay didn't look like anything... but then along came Tarit *anna* with a brush. Two strokes here, a touch on the top, three or four nudges at the bottom... and there it was! A horse! The boy was simply wonderstruck.

Tarit *anna* has an inimitable style, which has a strong flavour of Shantiniketan. He constantly explores new media and combinations and comes up with absolutely new idioms of self-expression for children. He recently published a book on his experiments titled, *Child art with everyday materials*.

An experience around the same time with another artist comes to mind. Before I formally joined KFI, I tried to contact a particular artist to learn some art. Preeti Kannan, the painter I had met in Mumbai, had referred me to him. She said she would put in a word about me. I dialled his number and asked for him. As soon as he came on the line, I

said, 'Hello! I am Samyuktha. I met the painter, Preeti Kannan, in Mumbai. She told me about you and said you might be willing to teach me art. So sir, can you teach me?'

Silence at the other end.

'Sir?'

'No! I can't... You should know how to talk to people,' and he slammed the receiver down!

I was speechless and red with embarrassment. That was when I realized how important self-introduction is, especially to an unknown person on the other side of the line. Surely, though not deliberately, I must have sounded proud and rude. Instead, after having introduced myself, I should have told him that I had heard a lot about him and that I wished to meet him some time and see his paintings. And then I should have asked him if he would teach me. It was a lesson well learnt.

Coming back to Tarit *anna*, I started learning art slowly under his guidance. I was quite interested in painting, but not in sketching. Water colours were my favourite medium. Though I wasn't exceptional, I thought I was good enough to wonder if I could take up art and painting as a career option.

I worked on my art almost every day. Tarit *anna* did not insist that we copy objects as they existed. Instead, he encouraged students to impart their own unique character to what they saw. In other words, he wanted us to perceive, not just see. I did a lot of outdoor and still-life sketching at this time.

'*The best way to begin a painting is by spoiling the paper*', Tarit would say. '*Crush it, wet it, dab two or three colours... do anything, but don't start with it crisp and white.*'

And he did just that. Gradually, shapes and interesting effects would begin to emerge on the paper. Exploiting these 'fluke effects and mistakes' he would come up with lovely paintings. I simply loved this exercise because you never knew what your painting was going to be until the 'spoiled' paper gave you ideas. Just doing the minimum by exploiting what a medium provides naturally was a wonderful concept and I did most of my paintings in this way.

I was not good at sketching people. But I never tried hard to improve on that. This observation gave me an insight into one aspect of my personality. I never really tried hard enough to do what I am not naturally good at. I would rather focus on areas where I have some basic talent.

Sometimes there would be something missing in the painting and I would rack my brains and keep trying out this and that, all the time with a constant fear that my painting would start looking worse.

Tarit *anna*, do something, please,' I would beg.

And Tarit *anna* would take the brush from me, swirl it once or twice in the palette and create the magic. And magic it was, because in no time and with so little effort he would add that something to the picture and it would come to life.

There was one particular incident that felt like some kind of divine intervention! Now picture this: a lily pond with steps on all four sides; a shady grove on the banks; and a small, ruined, forsaken temple on one side. The tank is full of pink and white lilies. Some

of them — at the centre of the tank - are basking in the morning sun and hence look brighter than the rest.

I managed to get more or less what I wanted in the picture, especially its light effect, and I was quite pleased with the painting. I wanted to show it to Gautam *anna* during the tea break. He was sitting under a tree and speaking to a student. As I went up to him and showed him the painting, the sunlight that was peeping through the leaves of the tree swaying in the gentle morning breeze focused just for a few moments precisely on the spot where it was supposed to fall on the lilies in the picture! It was absolutely magical and for a few moments you could almost imagine you were there, on the banks of the pond, admiring those beautiful lilies...

The ‘divine intervention’ was not yet over. During the Dasara vacation we all trekked to a Shiva temple in our village that is perched on top of a hill. On the way to the temple, what do you think I saw? A similar tank with pink water lilies surrounded by shady trees. Could this be a mere coincidence?

Equally exciting was working with Tarit *anna* and the other students on school projects like designing a poster for the drama festival, doing up the Assembly hall for the Open House, or even designing the stage for cultural events. It was all in Tarit *anna*’s hands to evolve new and innovative methods of presentation which could be executed by the students themselves.

After one year with him, however, although I enjoyed this ‘loose’ way of going about art, I felt it would be better to plan what I should be learning in a more systematic manner. Tarit *anna* and I drew up some kind of a syllabus, but in the meantime, my focus had shifted towards weaving. Art became a second priority. Though I didn’t pursue art systematically after that, I continued to paint regularly. But the world of art had changed for me - it was no more just about paint and paper. Working with *anna* exposed me to the many ways of art and to the variety of media that can create it. The voices of art and colour had begun to speak to me at last.

Sarigama and tha they they tha

When I joined Kalakshetra at the age often, I was interviewed by the famous dancer and teacher, Shri Janardhanan, as a prerequisite for my enrolling in the part-time dance course. I had already learnt some *Bharatanatyam* so when he asked me to do an *aaavu* I took off on one immediately: ‘*Theyya they theyya they...*’

‘Good. Do you also sing?’ he asked.

I sang my favourite *geetam* in Kalyani *ragam*.

‘She sings very well.’

‘So, do you want to learn dance or music?’ he asked me.

‘Both,’ I replied, excited.

He turned to my mother and said, ‘No, she can’t do both. Here at Kalakshetra you can do only one subject at a time.’ He closed his eyes for a moment and smiled.

‘Let her learn dance now. That is something she can learn better if she starts at a young age. She can learn music any time, but it is difficult to shift from music to dance at

a later age. And there is enough music around in Kalakshetra... *Yenna* (what)?' he looked at me, 'Dance *kar-thuko* (Learn dance).'

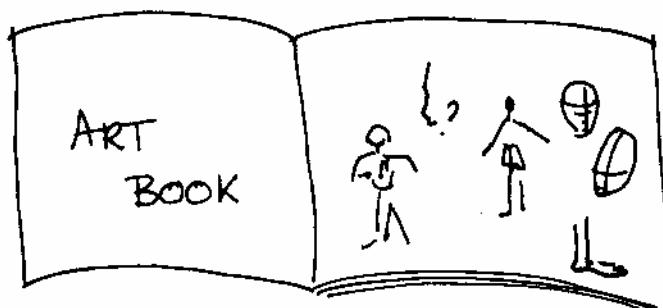
So I chose dance for my part-time five year diploma course at Ka-lakshetra. We had one hour classes after regular school, five days a week for five years.

Today I can see that Janardhanan Sir was right. Though I wasn't en-rolled in the music course at Kalakshetra, I continued learning classical and other kinds of vocal music through a variety of *kirtanas*, *bhajans* and folk songs that were taught at school. I regularly took part in competitions and group performances. Music went hand-in-hand with dance, and the atmosphere nurtured and nourished my love for both the art forms.

After my second year of dance, I started feeling that I could not withstand the physical strain and wanted to discontinue. 'Why do you want to stop after two years? You will start learning the more elaborate pieces from the third year onward,' my teacher and friends persuaded me. True it was: once I started with the *alarippu* and *jatisvarams*, I began enjoying dance even more, but still found it very strenuous. I gradually hopped from one year to the next till I successfully completed my five-year certificate programme in *Bharatanatyam*.

My dance teachers were quite keen that I should take up dancing as a full-time professional course after class XII at Kalakshetra. But I decided against it. I felt that I just didn't have the kind of stamina that dance demands, or perhaps I lacked the passion. In my last two years at school, I joined the part-time vocal music classes. As I had kept up with my classical singing at school, I was allowed to join the advanced classes, and I enjoyed my formal training in Carnatic music.

After I began with the PHE programme, I started feeling that I had stayed away too long from dance and should not allow five years of Kalakshetra training to go waste. I was also looking for some kind of physical activity to keep myself fit. In dance, I saw that both these objectives would be met. And so I decided to start dance training again.



MY HUMAN SKETCHING WAS TERRIBLE!

I was keen on studying with a dance teacher who followed the Kalakshetra style. There was no point changing styles and 'unlearning' what I had already learnt there. And above all, I respected the style for its mastery of the dynamics of the body, which gave the dance a unique beauty and poise.

When I approached Gautam *anna*, he said that while the School would look out for an appropriate teacher, I should also make my own effort to find one, if I were keen to start dance classes soon.

I was annoyed. ‘If I have to find my teachers all by myself and fix things up with them, what is the School for?’ I asked him one day.

‘It is a part of your education, my dear,’ he said, patting me on the back.

I didn’t like his answer that day. But eventually I realized that this approach definitely had its advantages. Finding out phone numbers, fixing up appointments with people, meeting them, visiting offices and getting information - doing all this and more did make me feel more confident and uninhibited about dealing with new people.

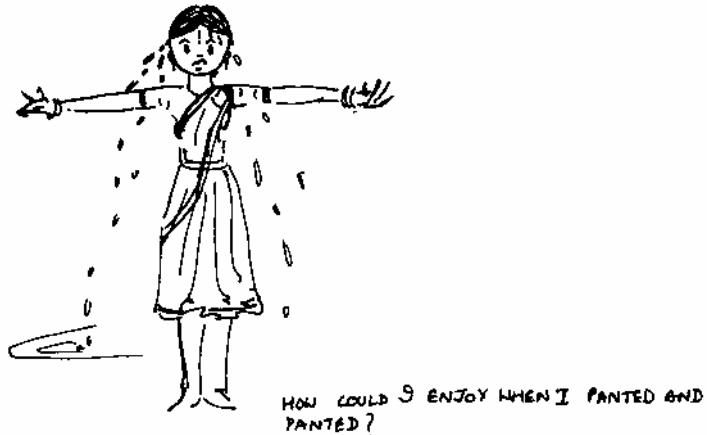
I had heard a lot about Smt. Savitri Jagannatha Rao and *Pradakshina*, her garage-turned-dance-school adjoining her house at Adyar. She was a very friendly and affectionate person. When I told her about the PHE programme and about my hesitation to join dance classes because of my lack of stamina, she brushed my fears aside.

‘Stamina! That can be cultivated by sheer practice, my dear,’ she said. ‘You have to work hard. Stamina *thannala vandhudum* (Stamina will develop by itself)’ I wouldn’t say I completely believed her, but I decided to give it a try once again.

Savitri aunty was very encouraging and I gradually began to regain my ‘form’. I went thrice a week for an hour or two. In the beginning, the worst part was actually going to the classes. The distance was too short to take a bus, too costly for an auto-rickshaw (I had to go to and fro three days a week), and too long for a walk. I would feel thoroughly exhausted walking all the way from school to my dance class and then walking all the way back to school again. The Chennai heat made it worse. When I told Savitri aunty, she said the exercise was good for my stamina! Phew! I gamely carried on like this for a month or two.

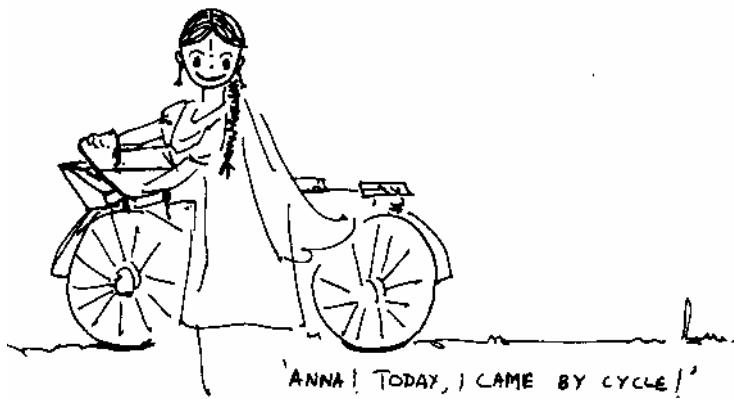
Then I bought a bicycle. I had learnt to balance on a cycle on a secluded street a few years earlier, but I had not ridden one since, let alone face city traffic. I started practising cycling early in the mornings on roads where there was less traffic. I would look so tense that people on the roads would immediately realize I was a learner and smile as I cycled nervously past. After a month’s practice I decided to cycle to school. The first person I saw in school was Ananth *anna*. I waved to him excitedly, ‘Anna, today, I came by cycle!’

Thanks to cycling, going to dance classes and travelling in general became much easier; all small trips now seemed to be increasingly under my control. I was still terrified of main road traffic and continued to get shouted at by bus drivers and *autowallas*. But, hey! I was getting better!



Savitri aunty was very proud to have a student who was doing 'something different,' and introduced me to visitors saying, 'This is Samyuktha. *Ennennavo interestina panra ava. Avalaye kettu terinjiko* (She is doing a lot of interesting things. Ask her and find out.)'

I started learning new dance compositions under her. She was an excellent composer and her works were aesthetic, different and interesting for the dancer to perform. The other students in the class were very helpful and friendly. I noticed one major difference between their dancing and mine. When they danced, they seemed to enjoy every minute of it. For me, the joy came in the relief I felt after the dancing was over! It never came while I danced. And I craved for it. I wanted to enjoy every moment of my dancing, but it rarely happened. How could I enjoy dancing when I was panting and puffing away? My legs ached and ached! And ached! How did the others manage it?



I struggled with this question. And then *Panchottara* just happened. Sumitra Gautama is a teacher in the School and was trained at Kalakshetra. For the twenty-fifth anniversary celebrations of the School in early 1998, she came up with the idea of putting up a dance drama called *Panchottara* — based on the responses of five women from Indian mythology to situations in their lives. Sumitra akka conceptualized each and every aspect of the piece. She composed the music herself and even designed the costumes. The text for the music was taken from classical literary works like the *Krishnavatara*, *Sundara Kandam*, *Silappadhikaram*, etc.

We were five dancers who would be playing the roles of Radha (myself), Urmila (Vinutha, an ex-student of the School), Parvati (Sumitra *akka*), Trijata (Divya *akka*, another teacher in the school) and Kannagi (Mahalakshmi, a student of class XI). The five situations to be enacted were: Radha coping with her heartbreak as Krishna departs for Brindavan never to return to her; the response of Urmila to a life of celibacy for fourteen years after Lakshmana leaves for the forest along with Rama; Trijata (Vibheesana's daughter) as a friend of Sita in Ashokavanam where Ravana has forcibly brought her; Kannagi's angry response when the King of Madurai kills her husband on a false implication of theft without conclusive evidence; and Parvati's efforts through pious penance to win Shiva's love.

Besides the role of Radha, I also played supportive roles for the other characters. Radha is extremely heartbroken when Krishna leaves for Brindavan. She begs the wind to transport her love to Krishna and to tell him how much she misses him. She wants just one more favour — the wind should bring back a single flower fallen on the ground from Krishna's garland while he danced, and just one melodious note from his flute. She cautions the wind not to get distracted by the scents of flowers or the music of the waters, and adds various such do's and don'ts.



TOO MUCH SAMYUKTHA, TOO MUCH !!

It was a lovely piece written by Munshi and brilliantly composed by Sumitra *akka*. She herself played the role of the wind. Most people thought she was fifteen years younger, because she always appeared to be the fittest, the most vivacious and the most creative of us all. She also looked totally relaxed while dancing which made us all feel very joyous. To date I have not seen anybody who can do so many things and put her heart and soul into each and every one of them in such a superb fashion. Sumitra *akka* has unbelievable energy and sometimes I think of her as a superwoman.

Before we worked on the dance composition itself, we did a number of exercises - both physical and mental - which included recitations, singing and body movements. We discussed all the characters at length. Sumitra *akka* spoke to us about each and every character and their various dimensions. Sometimes in a conversation I wouldn't understand everything that she said, but the sincerity with which she spoke and the intensity with which she described her own interpretations of each character carried an

immense amount of feeling and it is this understanding that came across on stage when we danced.

I was playing the role of a heartbroken lover for the first time in my life. And that too, the role of Radha who remained an eternal lover throughout her life-time! It might have helped to have had a lover at the time, but unfortunately I had none. I read whatever I could about Radha's character and on her relationship with Lord Krishna. With Sumitra *akka*'s help, I tried a lot to appear as convincing as possible.

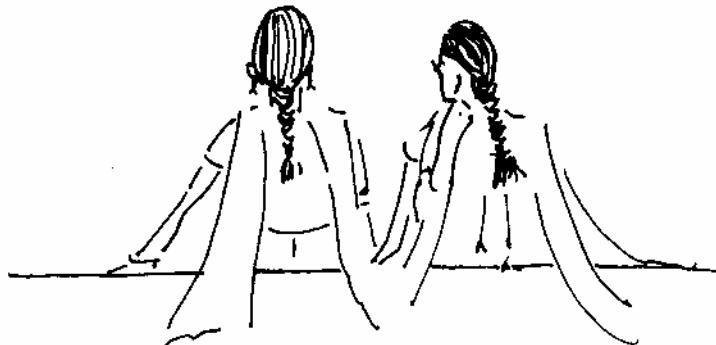
In *Panchottara*, I learnt some important lessons about myself and my engagement with dance. What I learnt from Sumitra *akka* was to *be* — rather than simply act — the character I was playing. If you are doing the role of a swan, *feel* you are a swan and *be* a swan, don't just dance *like* a swan

Panchottara gave me the 'drama' in dance that I was looking for. I love *abhinaya* (expressions). The problem in regular dancing is that one never got to *abhinaya* until the teacher was satisfied with the sweat and struggle of the *theyya they* in *Panchottara* there was enough scope for *abhinaya* since I played multiple roles. This, combined with the most creative *jatis* and *adavus* that embellish the character in the drama, made it a sheer joy to perform. The key was to continue being the character through the entire episode, while performing *abhinaya* or *jati*. I also enjoyed the value of homework that goes into understanding a character and the physical exercises that help you prepare for its performance.

The role I enjoyed doing most was not that of my central character Radha, but the *rakshashi* (demoness) who continuously taunts and tortures poor Sita in Trijata's episode. I loved the character and performed the role with such ease and confidence that I've never felt so satisfied. Even my father particularly appreciated this performance. It was lovely to be appreciated for being 'bad'! It never happens in real life, does it?

Panchottara gave me another gift: a great friend in Vinutha. It was not love at first sight. We kept seeing each other every day, learning our lines and doing exercises, but initially didn't go beyond 'hi' and 'bye'. Over time, our relationship blossomed into a lovely friendship. We shared many likes and dislikes, but more importantly, we respected each other when we differed. We attended many music, dance and film festivals, and hung out at fast food restaurants and the beach, enjoying each other's company tremendously. Vinuta was always the first one to know whatever was going on in my life.

One day, we decided to watch the video-tape of the *Panchottara* performance. We were really looking forward to seeing how we had performed, what with all the wonderful reviews we had received! But what a disappointment it was! I thought I was just terrible. I could recognise at least half a dozen things that I needed to improve on considerably. I was extremely hurt and angry: why had everyone said I had danced well?



A GREAT FRIEND IN VINUTA

Later that day, I wrote in my diary: ‘Why did I feel so hurt today? As JK says, I think I had built an image of myself, from what others said, that “I am a good dancer.” But when I saw that “good” image of myself falling to pieces, my ego is hurt and I am thinking, “Am I really that bad?” I think we feel hurt or happy depending on what image we build of ourselves and how that is affected by what others say to us...’ Vinuta and I consoled ourselves by saying that the ‘camera eye’ kind of exaggerated our faults and perhaps we were not that bad after all on stage. Though I felt very hurt and disillusioned with my dance skills, I decided to give myself another chance and to focus on improving my faults.

On the eve of Aurobindo’s birth anniversary in August 1998, Sumitra *akka* directed a second dance production, *Earth bound. Heaven amorous* which was staged at Auroville in Pondicherry. The production was an amalgam of dance, music, mime and recitation, based on Aurobindo’s poetry. Though we went through similar exercises as with *Panchottara*, I could not really relate to Aurobindo’s poetry. Sumitra *akka* did her best to help us appreciate the poetry, but I found it too abstract to understand, internalize and perform. I was really glad when it was all over.

Dance lessons did not quite pick up after that. I continued my classes with Savitri aunty for about a year and a half, but was not able to really give them my best. In the meantime, however, my explorations in music continued.

The best thing about Chennai is the annual cultural festival. Every year in the months of December and January, the city of Chennai sways to the rhythms of classical dance and music, especially of the Carnatic style. Vocal and instrumental musicians and dancers from all parts of India flock to the city to perform for the city’s audiences. Every artiste yearns for their appreciation.

Each nook and corner of Chennai has *sabha* and the strings of the *tambura* can be heard from ten in the morning till late at night. Some *sabhas* even have tiffin facilities, so that the *rasikas* can attend the concerts without a break. I looked forward to the cultural festival every year, and made it a point to attend at least one concert (of either dance or music) each day.

To be sitting amidst such an enthusiastic audience which nods, sways and keeps the beat (*talani*) was an experience in itself. Some of the people in the audience would bring little pocket notebooks and jot down the *ragas* and *kritis* sung by the performing artiste. If you were bored by the music, there was still enough entertainment around. You just

had to lift your head and look. A head would be nodding in appreciation so vigorously it might just drop off and go rolling over the ground. Some people would be fast asleep, soothed by the afternoon sun and the music, and perhaps curd rice as well. Sometimes, the person sitting right in front of you would raise his hands and gesture to the artist' *Wah! Pramadam!* (Excellent!) Thus, the audience is sometimes more interesting to watch than the artiste!

In one of the concerts, a 60 year-old *mami* was sitting next to me. The singer had just begun the *alapana*, "Thadarinnana..."

Pat came the response from her: 'Sudhdha dhanyasi itlet (Isn't it Sudhdha dhanyasi?)'

Not that she required my confirmation. I could never identify *ragams* as easily as that and many times I simply nodded in embarrassment, 'Teriyite (I don't know).' After the *alapana* and the violin recital, just when the song was about to begin, she started muttering under her breath, but loud enough for me to hear, 'Bbavamulo', and looked expectantly at the artist. And believe it or not, the singer began 'Bhavamulona Bhagyamulandunu Govinda Govinda...' I couldn't believe my ears! The lady gave me a look which said, 'See, I knew.' Of course she knew. These people seemed to know everything.

The other wonderful thing about the performance was that during the 'Thani avarthanam' which occurred at the end of the main concert - only the percussion instruments of the *mridangam* and the *ghatam* or the *kanjira* would interplay with one another in something that sounds like a question-and-answer or 'tit for tat.' The whole hall would then reverberate to the 'thak thak thak thak' - with the audience slapping their thighs in rhythm and nodding at the artist as if his performance depended solely on their keeping the *talari*.

T.V. Sankarnarayanan is my favourite singer. He is the nephew of the legendary singer Madurai Mani Iyer. Once TVS sits on the stage to perform, he literally plays with the seven *swaras* in countless ways, until you start wondering how it is humanly possible to do so - each time with characteristically unique permutations and combinations. He sings with such effortless abandon and expressiveness that the performance leaves you spellbound.

The state of ecstasy I used to experience in his concerts is something I simply cannot capture in words. Good music always brought tears to my eyes, and I would be seized by a strange elation. It was obvious why music is called a divine art. I felt really blessed that I could appreciate the performances of these musicians.

Even if it was something as simple as a *sa re ga ma pa da ni sa*, I seemed to enjoy singing in a way I never enjoyed dance. I therefore decided to continue with my music seriously, though I would keep it as a hobby. Though I stopped dance training after a year and a half with Savitri aunty, I could never really stop singing. I continued my lessons under Smt. Nyana, a very affectionate teacher with immense patience. She was a friend of Raji aunty and had decided to teach students without accepting fees — like her own guru. I practised regularly. Sometimes there would be disruptions in the schedule but I could never go off *sa re ga ma* for too long.

Origami: Paradise from paper

My yoga teacher, Mr Mukundan, asked me one morning: ‘Why don’t you join us? We are going to meet Mr. Natarajan. He is an architect and I heard he is doing some interesting things.’

‘Architect!’ I thought for a moment and agreed to go.

Soon we were there. And what I saw there was not just fascinating, it was mind-boggling!

Mr. Natarajan, fondly known as *Chotu*, was attracted to *origami*, the Japanese art of paper folding. When we think of *origami*, we think of animals, birds and flowers folded out of paper. But Mr. Natarajan had something else in mind. He evolved a completely new technique of paper art that combined architecture with *origami*. The result was a magical paper world of 3-D pop-up mansions, staircases, houses and geometrical shapes! His ‘architectural wonders’ were embellished with brilliant colours and patterns derived from Islamic art.

‘Will you teach me...? I have all the time in the world,’ I asked imploringly.

He looked at me, surprised.

How could an 18 year-old say that she has all the time in the world? he seemed to think.

I started off instantly with the story of my post-school saga, and told him that I had fallen in love with his work.

‘I don’t generally teach...’ he replied.

I held my breath.

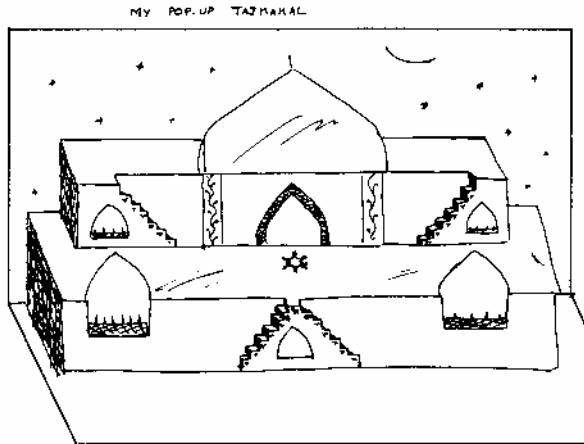
‘But... ok. When do you want to come?’

I went to his house everyday and worked at my own desk. Mr. Natarajan would now and then supervise my efforts even as he worked on his architectural plans, a cigarette always gripped between his fingers.

What is most amazing about architectural *origami* is that the three dimensions of a model emerge not by cutting paper, but by simply making appropriate slits and folds. There is absolutely no loss of paper, though the piece itself may give the impression that large chunks have been cut out. Mr. Natarajan would slice the paper at the right places with a paper cutter and start working adeptly with his fingers and before you could say *abracadabra*, he had produced an artistic staircase, a cute little house or even a dream mansion.

Mr. Natarajan had a passion for the works of M.C. Escher, a Dutch artist. He tried to adapt many of Escher’s illusionary houses and staircases into his models. Needless to say, this was not easy. Conceptualizing in two-dimensions and visualizing in three is quite a tricky business. Which part of the paper should form the height of the building, which the ceiling or the top, which part will form the mini staircase connecting the first and second floors — all this has to be worked out on the flat, plain, white paper in front of you. Despite all your calculations, if the heights and breadths are not proportionate, the model will lose its stability and collapse. Architectural *origami* requires an understanding of all these aspects and Mr. Natarajan was indeed quite a master.

After learning from him, I attempted one or two new pieces on my own. With a lot of effort I succeeded in making the simplest model of the Taj Mahal. Phew! The technique could, however, be adapted to make masks, lamp-shades and even greeting cards. Even today, an origami-based pop-up card is, for me, one of the easiest ways to impress friends and relatives.



Back in the School – and armed now with a brand new skill – I

Back in the School — and aimed now with a brand new skill — I found that students were actually interested for the first time in what I was doing. As I showed one piece after another at the prayer assembly one day, I could hear gasps of wonder. Everybody was so impressed that I was also given an opportunity to teach a few students of class **XI**.

It is sad that today Sri Natarajan is no more. He passed away in the year 2001, probably due to heart failure. I read about it in the papers a couple of years after I finished my **PHE**. It felt like the collapse of a splendid staircase.

Lights, camera, action!

‘I have always wanted to act...’

Does this sound familiar? I am sure it is — you hear it said by many actors and actresses as they stylishly brush their hair aside with their hands when asked a question to that effect by interviewers. But the difference as far as I am concerned is that nobody ever asked me this question and nor did I get a chance to say, “Well, I’ve always wanted to act!“

If there was anything that I was confident of doing well, it was acting. It didn’t matter that I had never acted in a single play up to then. It didn’t matter that nobody really told me, ‘Hey! Why don’t you act? You’ll make a good actor.’ It didn’t matter that my capability to act had never been tested. Somehow, I nurtured this secret desire to act.

Since I had trained in dance at Kalakshetra, I was always chosen for dance performances and occasionally for music competitions. I would watch drama rehearsals during the school Annual Day functions, learn all the dialogues by heart and rehearse them on my own stage - the hostel bathroom!

I have often wondered what it is that interests me about theatre. Whether it is actually an interest in films or in theatre, I have observed that I am very attracted to the visual media. So whether it is theatre or films, painting or dancing — all these ways of expression appealed to me more than, say, the print or academic media.

Apart from watching a good film — I've always enjoyed both so-called art cinema as well as commercial flicks - I love discussing its various aspects. That one expression of the actor which conveys a hundred words, that one visual with which the story ends, that one camera shot which brings a new meaning to a frame, that one score which haunts you for several days — I think I just love the film experience. The film review section of the newspaper was one of my must-read sections and I envied film critics who got to see all kinds of movies from different countries and were even paid for it! So it was not clear if I was just a die-hard film fan or serious about getting involved in film-making. Was I getting confused about whether I was in love with film or theatre — as it often happens in Bollywood love triangles?

The School holds a drama festival every year, when students from various schools staged plays which are then followed by a discussion.

I got a chance to act in 'Where the Rivers Meet,' a play put up by the School. This was an adaptation of Girish Karnad's play, *Tale danda*. The play was directed by Sumitra akka. As usual, she ensured that all of us were involved with all aspects of the play.

For many days we merely focussed on a few exercises that would make us feel comfortable with each other, both physically and mentally. This was very important for me because we were not even classmates. We had a number of discussions about the characters in the play and tried out interesting games. In one such game we had to write down five sentences that would describe our personality on a chit of paper. We then shuffled them all and each of us picked one. We would proceed to analyze the person's character from the five sentences written on the chit and then enact it as well.

The one I picked seemed to be a boy's. Now how did I guess that? Just felt it. He seemed to have a fickle mind. I had thought of enacting this character in the form of a conversation between two lovers sitting on the Besant Nagar beach. When my turn came, I felt very nervous. This was the first time I was going to act. I walked up to the centre of the circle and somehow managed to finish the piece. There was thunderous applause! 'Too much, Samyuktha, too much,' Sumitra akka was saying, clapping heartily. It was almost as if I were a film actress who had completed her first successful shot in front of the camera. A little while later, a girl from class XII came up to me and said unhesitatingly, 'You know what, I think you are in love with someone.' But I wasn't. And yet, I managed to convince this girl with my acting. The entire episode gave me the confidence that I could act.

The play had a sprinkling of dance, abstract movements, *tappattam* (dancing using a little drum called *tappu*) and song. It was an historical tale based on the Kannada saint, Basavanna. There were many male characters but very few female roles. I didn't have a specific role but kept walking in and out performing various characters. There was also a little dance composed for me which represented the victory of good over evil. I enjoyed every moment of the play- the rehearsals, learning the lines, watching the others, evolving the script along with akka. It was indeed my tryst with theatre.

What I enjoyed immensely were the discussions that we used to have after each play with the panel of ‘judges’ and the actors. Various aspects of the play were brought up, including team work and actor-to-actor vibes. These sessions also threw up some interesting questions and ‘food for thought.’

One day I was returning home by bus after watching a really inspiring play with a social message put up by another school. I was still recalling parts of the play, when I suddenly realized that the bus was moving unsteadily. To my horror, I saw in the rear view mirror that the driver appeared to be drunk and was not able to keep his eyes open. I wondered what I should do. I felt hesitant to confront the driver. What if he wasn’t drunk? ‘In all probability, we should reach home safe. Why bother?’ I thought. But what if we didn’t! Then the responsibility would be mine for not having brought it to the attention of the rest of the passengers. It was time to act! ‘Just get up and confront him!’ my conscience told me. ‘What’s the use of watching plays and being inspired by them, if you can’t ace when it is needed?’

I went up to the conductor and told him to stop the bus right then and there as the driver was driving dangerously. ‘He is drunk. Stop him, right now,’ I almost yelled. The conductor smiled sarcastically, ‘How do you know? Did you go out with him?’ he asked. I started demanding his name and told him I was going to report him for indecent behaviour to the authorities. Soon the rest of the women in the bus joined me and the conductor was forced to go up to the driver and tell him something. The driving improved thereafter. The conductor jeered at me as I was getting off at my stop. I still had a nagging doubt whether the driver was actually drunk or just plain exhausted. In any case, it didn’t matter because he had been driving dangerously, and I did what I knew was right.

The first film festival I attended was *Naayika*, organized on International Women’s Day in 1997. It was a day-long affair with free admission and I was able to see three Indian movies. After each screening, either the film maker or the main actor interacted with the audience. I saw films made by some of the best directors today — Shyam Benegal, Aparna Sen and Saeed Mirza. It was my first experience of sitting among film enthusiasts and film makers while we discussed different aspects of the film. I got to see and understand the thinking behind serious cinema.

Documentaries are always boring — or so I thought. The black and white jaded photography; a steely-lifeless narrative evoked immediate yawning — until I saw Anand Patwardhan’s films. In a two-day film festival organized in Chennai, I saw about four of his films — *Narmada Diary*, *Ram ke Naam*, *Father, Son and Holy War* and *Bombay, Our City*. Suddenly, the chair on which I was sitting felt uncomfortable: it was as if I were sitting on thorns. His simple and intelligent questions brought out the most powerful and eloquent answers from very ordinary people. They made me think, question and reflect. What made the experience even better was Mr. Patwardhan’s participation in the after-film discussions. This film festival cured me permanently of my prejudice against documentaries.

We didn’t get to see theatre performances as easily, especially because the tickets were very expensive. But Vinuta and I couldn’t resist *Mahatma vs. Gandhi*, a play directed by Feroze Khan and with our favourite star Naseeruddin Shah in the role of Gandhi and K.K. Menon as Harilal (Gandhi’s son). The play deals with the relationship

between Gandhi and Harilal, their viewpoints, contradictions, psychologies and the final rift that leads to the son becoming a drunkard. Both the Gandhis, strong-willed and passionate in their own ways, were very beautifully and sensitively portrayed by the actors. The genius of the play was such that you ended up empathizing with both and, in the process, appreciated the complex nature of the father-son relationship. I also watched a couple of Tamil plays performed by *Koothupattarai*, a progressive and vibrant theatre group in Chennai which specializes in combining folk elements with contemporary theatre.

I also began to observe the differences between the two media — theatre and film. In theatre, by the sheer power of your presence and acting on stage, you have to keep the audience involved in your character and thereby in the story. There is also a need for more exaggerated ‘throwing-your-voice’ dialogue deliveries, yet a subtlety in the portrayal of emotions to reach out directly to the person in the corner of the last row down the hall. Moreover, every second of your presence on stage is important for the audience to ‘stay connected’ with your character.

In films, the actor is not required to connect to a live audience. Instead, the camera, the director and the editor determine what the audience would focus on and what emotions are triggered. A wide variety of technical components come together to create the experience of what we call cinema.

‘Lights, camera, action!’

I didn’t have to wait too long for that. As a part of their curriculum, the Film Institute students at Taramani, Chennai, had to shoot a three-minute film. A student from the Institute knew that I was interested in acting and suggested to her friends that they include me in the project. The director called me up one day and asked me to be ready for a screen test. Together we went to the ‘Mughal Gardens’ at the Film Institute where I posed for some stills for the posters. Then the big day came. I didn’t have any dialogue, just expressions. I was playing the role of a Mughal princess and had three shots to be filmed — all in the afternoon Chennai sun. I looked absolutely shrivelled out by the end of the shoot. But yes, I did have my brush with ‘Lights, Camera, and Action!’

Through all this, I discovered that what I really liked was acting, whether it was for film or theatre. But my experiences in either remained too limited for me to pursue acting as a career, the dream of becoming an actress, however, someday lives on.

3 A love story in colour

Sometimes, things we do casually take us a long way. We might begin doing something for no special reason or simply for what seems to be a passing interest. My romance with weaving started off like one of those casual affairs — I didn’t think it would end in a marriage! I just felt that it was something interesting to learn, something that was not as common as painting, music, dance, etc. It felt good when somebody said, ‘You know, she does weaving...’ and to hear the other person exclaim, ‘Weaving! Wow, so interesting.’ I was proud of my affair with weaving, and almost felt as if I had a film star for a boyfriend!

I started learning weaving at the School mainly because the facility was available there, and it seemed fascinating. The weaving section was a classroom with three big

looms, two ‘baby’ looms and all the other accessories and facilities required for running the looms. The weaving master was 75-year old Shri Shankaran, who became *my guru*.

We mainly wove coarse material in cotton — suitable for making pillow covers, bags, napkins, towels and doormats. These were easier for young students to learn and for the master to teach. Students attended the class for an hour each day.

After the first year, decided to take up weaving as my primary subject. The decision came after a discussion I had with Sumitra *akka*, my mother and a few other teachers at the School. After having done subjects like art, dance, music, origami, etc, we felt that I had had ‘enough fun’ and *it was time* for me to do something more focused. I listed the reasons for choosing weaving and textiles as my primary focus:

- It was a creative activity involving the mind as well as the hands.
- It satisfied my urge to work with people, in this case the weaving community.
- It opened up many other avenues for the future like creative design and marketing.

Clearly the list of reasons showed that weaving was no longer a casual affair! Sumitra *akka* suggested that I work on my skills in four areas of handloom textiles over the remaining part of my PHE: weaving, dyeing, textile design and marketing.

After I decided to take up textiles seriously, the first person I contacted was Uzramma. I don’t remember how, when and why I first met her. My close association with her began when I learnt jewellery-making from her for three weeks in Hyderabad after my tenth standard examination. Soon she became my principal guide in this exciting journey of handlooms and remains so to this day.

Uzramma is synonymous with Dastkar Andhra, an NGO working with handloom weavers in Andhra Pradesh. In a little office tucked away in the busy Park Lane of Secunderabad are a group of people who consistently keep working on ways and means of benefiting handloom weavers. They have set up an extensive network of handloom weavers across the state, marketing their products, introducing them to new designs and marketing skills, conducting workshops in dyeing, especially natural dyeing, and so on.

When I first wrote to Uzramma of my intentions, she replied immediately in her lovely handwriting, explaining what I could do if I decided on this path. She suggested that, to work on my technical skills, I could undergo weaving, dyeing and design — through any training course offered by Weavers Service Centres and other textile institutes apart from studying directly under a weaver. She asked me to get in touch with Dr. Arti Kawlra — a sociologist who lived in Chennai — to arrange for my visits to weaver communities in and around Chennai. Dr. Kawlra had done her thesis on the Kanchipuram weavers and had very interesting insights about the handloom industry. Another interesting idea suggested was that I should check out the possibility of setting up and ‘running my own loom’ either in Saidapet, a weaver community in Chennai or at the School itself.

I met Dr. Kawlra and drew up a tentative plan. She suggested that I could spend time with four weaving communities — in Kanchipuram or Swamimalai for silk weaving; Saidapet for *lungi* and yardage; Pondur in Andhra for *khadi* weaving and Athanur in Salem for fine-count *dhotis*. ‘Learn weaving like it is going to be your career,’ she told me. ‘And just learning it is not enough, you should be able to contribute to the community.’ We also discussed various options for a career in textiles after my PHE:

- Academically oriented courses and research in anthropology and sociology;
- A diploma in design either at NID or NIFT;
- Aesthetics-oriented courses like fine arts;
- A technology-based course like a B. Tech. in textiles;
- Running an independent guild and thus being self-employed.

Though it seemed like it was all going well, I must admit I was pretty anxious. People around me were having a field day with their expectations, not quite understanding what it meant to learn weaving as a subject and a career in the first place. ‘Can you weave sarees?’ ‘Do you plan to run your own guild?’ ‘Wow! So you are going to be wearing clothes you design and weave!’ Rather than being excited, I started feeling very anxious wondering if I would measure up to others’ expectations. The rhythm of the loom haunted me. ‘Will I ever be able to do all these things - designing and weaving saris, and doing all that? What if I can’t?’

I wrote to Uzramma again, about my discussions with Dr. Kawlra and about my anxieties. Uzramma sent a quick reply. ‘Just learn. Don’t be anxious. Career can be decided upon later.’ She also expressed a lot of confidence in me and in the approach that I had chosen. ‘Neither you nor your approach to education is going to be a failure. You will definitely be able to earn an honourable living, and your work will certainly benefit society and the handloom weaver... If you are feeling burdened by things, it is our failure, not yours.’ There was so much positive energy in that letter that I enthusiastically stepped into the fascinating world of weaving and textiles!

Shankaran anna

Seventy-five year-old Shankaran *anna* was certainty not an ‘*anna* (brother) to me, but that was the common way of addressing male teachers at the School. Though I felt awkward initially calling someone as old as my grandfather ‘*anna*, I soon got used to it. It was funnier still to hear him calling the other teachers ‘*akka*.

The most inspiring thing about Shankaran *anna* was his nature: he was humility personified. I admired the way he interacted with teachers and students, ever so self-effacing. Whether it was a five year-old or a fifty year-old, he spoke in the most polite manner and always made the other person feel important. Though he was required to teach only for an hour everyday, he used to come to school at exactly 9:30 in the morning like anybody else. He always carried a little brown bag, its handle looped round one arm, and a black umbrella in the other which served both as his walking stick (not that he needed one) and a shield against the sun and the rain.

‘People don’t understand weaving, *kuzhandai* (‘child’ — that was how he always addressed me). You have to work all morning and afternoon for that one-hour class in the evening so that all the looms are functioning properly. And what happens in the evening? The students come, they go ‘*thadak-thadak*’ on the loom, snap all the yarn and we have to start all over again. Kids will be kids... Ha! ha!’ he would laugh.



I always felt he was a little too lenient with the students and would often lament that they were taking advantage of his goodness. But he would brush my complaints aside. 'Nalla kuzhandaima adhu. Appadi solladhema...' (She is a nice child, that girl. Please don't say that.)' Funniest of all was when he would prepare the assessment report of the students' performance at the end of the term. I had to assist him in writing a sentence or two about each student in English.

'Sudeepti,' I would call out the name from the register and wait for him to give his comments about the student, so that they could be translated into English.

'Sudeepti? Oh, that girl with the pony tail. She is a very good girl. Very good, very good... She has learnt everything. Give her an A. Yes, an A.'

'Bharat?'

'Yes, yes! A very good boy. Talks a lot but does good work.'

'But I always see him coming late to class,' I interrupted.

"No, no... but he does good work. Definitely, we ought to give him an A.'

And this would go on — whether it was Swati, Sulagna, Vishal, or Vinod, he never had a harsh word or complaint against anybody. He gave them all A's and only occasionally a B! There were simply no failures in *annas* classes.

In addition to weaving and spinning, Shankaran *anna* trained me in all the stages of setting up the loom. Soon I was assisting him in every process. I was definitely no expert, in fact, I was much slower than him; but he treated me as an equal partner and encouraged me endlessly.

Weaving is an interesting process. It produces one of the most essential commodities required by humans. Any cloth is the result of the interlacing of two sets of yarn — the vertical yarn, called the warp and the horizontal yarn, called the weft. The warp is set on the loom whereas the weft is woven across the warp using a pod-like wooden case called the shuttle. Thus, the warp and weft are made to dance 'hand-in-hand, one-step-at-a-time' to create a woven wonder — a fabric.

Sometimes, we needed the help of another weaver to set up the warp, and the three of us would do the job together. Each time, *anna* patiently taught me everything and saw to it that I learnt the task. The other weaver must have surely thought that he was giving me too much importance.

As the days roiled by, *annas* eyesight became weaker. He could still manage everything by himself but it took him more time, energy and effort. And what was the need for him to, when I was there? I was always very happy to be in his company and to assist him. We would discuss politics, religion, weavers, everything under the sun, and he would often sing some Christian songs. Sometimes, after a whole day of effort, we would notice a mistake and would have to start all over. Sometimes, due to some silly reason, the warp yarn on either side of the cloth would keep snapping; or sometimes the shuttle would fly out and fall on the floor. I would get really frustrated, get up from the loom in a fit of anger and leave the room, only to return in a few minutes to find *anna* humming to himself and repairing all the damaged yarns one by one. He would welcome me back with a smile, 'Come, come, my dear... weaving is like that. You get irritated in the beginning. But you conquer irritation over time.'

Patience! The greatest virtue a weaver acquires is patience. A weaver can't afford to be otherwise.

I used to make many mistakes, sometimes disastrous ones, but he would simply say, 'Who doesn't make mistakes? Don't worry, dear.' If I needed to come on non-working days or a little earlier in the day, he would always bring my favourite sponge cake and something spicy picked up from the bakery on his way to the School. I am convinced I was his most pampered student ever!

Together we went to set up looms in other places. On one such occasion, we went to a Home for the Mentally Challenged in Pammal, Chennai. *Anna*, mingled freely with the inmates - whose ages ranged from 8 to forty-five. He was *so* affectionate dial they all immediately took to him.



We were thoroughly entertained by their 'Prabhu Deva', who wriggled to the latest Tamil hit, amidst loud cheering from his friends!

Shankaran *anna* was not a weaver by caste. He was born into a farming family. He wanted to marry a girl from a weaver family and his father-in-law laid down a condition that he could wed his daughter only if he learnt weaving! So it was a marriage woven with love for his wife. From then on, there was no looking back. He served in various government posts and finally joined as a teacher at the School eighteen years ago, after his retirement from government service. He was very sympathetic to the weaver

community and regarded himself as one of them. Sometimes he would say pessimistically, 'It is just not fair; the weaver has always been poor, but he had his dignity intact. Today nobody is interested in the weaver. Nobody.' And then, seeing my glum expression, he would say smiling, 'You should become an officer and help them.'

Shankaran *anna* was also an expert in spinning. He got an award for it from none other than Mahatma Gandhi himself in a community spin-ning competition that was held during the *khadi* movement. I was first introduced to the *takli*, a drop spindle and the box *charkha*, the spinning wheel, during the summer of 1995 when Mr. L. Kannan of PPST Foundation, Chennai, visited our village. Every summer season was mango time in the village, when friends and relatives from different parts of India came to spend a few days in our company. 'It's easy... it goes like this,' he explained as he operated the *charkha*, drawing out yarn from a cotton sliver as we watched him in wonder. It was magical! My father sat upright and announced with great seriousness and enthusiasm, 'From now on, I am going to spin my own yarn everyday and get it woven into cloth.' Soon after Mr. Kannan left, we bought a box *charkha* and *takli* and I would spin now and then during the holidays, just to keep in touch. My father tried to spin too, but soon gave it up.

The box *charkha* is set in a portable box, which can be carried around like a suitcase. The *kisan charkha* is exactly the same *charkha*, but without the box. It is said to have been designed especially for farmers by Gandhiji during his stay in prison, hence the name.

I restarted spinning cotton under *anna*'s guidance. As I spun regularly, I improved my skill considerably and was able to produce yarn that was even and fine. The spun yarn was sometimes used as weft to weave napkins.

The School was usually invited by the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT), Chennai to organize a weaving and spinning workshop as a part of the annual Sarang cultural festival. Our team consisted of *anna*, one of his grandsons and me. I usually took charge of spinning and *anna* and his grandson handled the weaving.



It was a great experience to be teaching spinning to young students, parents and professors. The awe with which people looked at me when I spun thread was flattering. I would make them sit one by one, hold their hands while they handled the *charkha* and try to explain to them the importance of coordination and concentration while spinning. Once you master both the movements — that of rotating the *charkha* and drawing yarn from the cotton sliver, there you are! I was so involved in my role as a teacher that at the

end of the workshop when Raji aunty asked me with a mischievous gleam in her eyes, 'Did you make any boy friends?' I almost bit my tongue in embarrassment!

'No, aunty,' I replied. How could I tell her that the thought didn't even strike me and that I was too immersed in getting people to appreciate spinning and weaving? I wonder what all those students thought about the encounter?

For conducting this three-day workshop at the IIT, *anna* used to get a small remuneration. On this occasion, he insisted on sharing it amongst the three of us equally. I protested. After days of telling me that he was feeling guilty keeping someone else's money, *anna* bought me a wrist watch as a present. I still wear it everyday, seven years later, for it reminds me of all those wonderful times I had in *annas* affectionate company.

Textile Travels

Besides weaving at the School, I also visited a few weaver communities in and around Chennai, like Saidapet, Anakaputtut, Pammai and Kanchipuram. Shankaran *anna* accompanied me on my first visit to **many** of these places. Aarti akka went along with me to Kanchipuram. I found that each area has its distinct characteristics - the kind of products they weave, the way their community is organised, their economic status, and so on.

Saidapet was a major centre for handloom *tungis* and handkerchiefs. Weavers here also used to weave the Real Madras Handkerchiefs (RMHK) which were a famous and familiar export to the Arabic and African countries for more than 400 years.

When I first visited the community around April 1997, there were about 12 operating looms. We also visited the homes of other families that were involved in other pre- and post-loom work or the making of loom accessories. Shankaran *anna* explained to me the different processes and phases of operations within the weaver community. Though he didn't personally know any of them, he nevertheless introduced me in his usual good-natured way: 'She loves weaving and is learning weaving from me. She wanted to see how you do this...'

Following Uzramma's suggestion, I started exploring the possibility of renting a loom in Saidapet and learning from the weavers there. Saidapet seemed the ideal choice because it was very close to where I lived and I could easily commute by bus everyday. Ah! If only I could find someone to teach me...

When I visited Saidapet six months later, there were hardly two looms left working! It was painful to see the weaver community disintegrating before my eyes. So my plans to start weaving there had to be aborted because the few weavers who still remained were themselves in a very pitiful, disillusioned state and weren't too enthused with the idea of training someone like me.

The collapse of the industry was mainly attributed to the onslaught of power loom-manufactured *tungis*, both in the domestic and export markets. One weaver complained that some power loom exporters even shamelessly stamped their products as 'handloom' and sold them as such. The other important reason was the disappearance of the support industries - dyeing, warping (the process of preparing the warp yarn for weaving), reed making (one of the components of the loom) and so on which are very important for the

smooth running of a weaver household. How long could the weavers survive if they had to run to Anakaputtur every time for every little task?

At Anakaputtur (also in Chennai), they weave *sarees* (cotton, polycotton and sometimes silk) and dress material using the jacquard and the dobbey. I had a very moving experience when I visited a weaver's house. It was a one-room hut, and when Shankaran *anna* and I entered, the hut was full of smoke. In one corner was the loom. It was pretty dark inside. The weaver immediately sent one of his sons to buy a cold drink for us, despite our vehement protests. Outside the house sat his absolutely emaciated wife twisting a new set of warp for one of the master weavers. She must have been in her late twenties but she already had thick glasses on, thanks to the appalling conditions into which their occupation had pushed them. And for the labour of sitting in that bent posture for 6-8 hours and twisting yarn for almost two days, she earned a mere fifteen rupees!

These weavers were really friendly people and what clicked between us immediately was that they too spoke Telugu. We started chatting cheerfully, neglecting Shankaran *anna* completely! When we were about to leave, the weaver pulled out a metre of polycot yardage from the shelf, probably saved for his family. He gave it to me. 'Keep it in our memory,' he said. I wanted to pay him for the piece but in situations like this it becomes really difficult to decide whether it is right to offer money at all. One needs to take care not to offend. Hesitantly, I offered a few rupee notes, but he shook his head in horror, 'No, no! Not at all. It's our gift to you.' Saying this, he said goodbye and briskly resumed his weaving.



Kanchipuram is a completely different community. Here a group of families specializes in a specific job - like dyeing, designing, marketing **or** weaving. This division of labour is a very striking feature of the industry in this famous temple town.

For years now, the Kanchipuram industry has earned a name for high quality silk sarees. Their gorgeous designs are woven in bright, contrasting colours. The motifs are drawn largely from the temple and from their surroundings - like the *gopuram* (temple tower), *hamsa* (swan), *mango*, (mango) and *rudrakskam* (a seed used for making rosaries). Of course, they now weave all kinds of designs, since they feel their traditional

motifs have become old fashioned. I saw a proud display of a *zari* silk shawl, which had a portrait of Sivaji Ganesan, the legendary actor of Tamil cinema, woven onto it!

In the summer of 1998, my mother, my sister and I visited a family friend Shri Ramanna who lived in Ganapathipalyam village near Coimbatore. My mother suggested that we visit some textile units in Coimbatore - known as the 'Manchester of south India'. Ramanna *garu*, a respected man in his seventies, knew people in the industry and agreed to accompany us. This was my first exposure trip to an industrial textile unit.

We saw large-scale operations of cloth being bleached and dyed, as well as a computer-operated jacquard loom where you had to feed the design into the software, type in the specifications and the loom wove it for you! 'Oh, wow!' I thought, as I remembered the handloom weaver who toils on his loom to weave his creations. It was quite amazing to see how over the years, machines have been developed to do all the tasks that were being done by people, that too on a much larger scale. As we walked past the gigantic machines — roaring, beating and rotating — I thought about the complexity of the 'machine vs. man' debate. Which was the way to go?

From the textiles of the south, my travels took me to Benaras, the pinnacle of brocade weaving in India. In October 1998, I attended the third Congress on Traditional Science and Technology in that city which is in Uttar Pradesh. The Congress was organized by the Patriotic and People-oriented Science and Technology (PPST) Foundation, a Chennai-based group of professionals and engineers. PPST was a research-action group working for more than fifteen years to build upon the knowledge and skills of traditional practitioners in India. Their vision was to promote and develop these technologies that could give the world more people-friendly, Gandhian alternatives while improving the status of their practitioners. The Congress is a platform on which several traditional technologists — artisans working on textiles, leather, metals, wood, bamboo, stone and clay — and organizations working with them come together to share their skills, insights, concerns and challenges.

I attended several sessions on handloom and other interesting workshops. Many aspects of the handloom industry were new to me and I often had difficulty in understanding some concepts and terms. Nevertheless, I wanted to make the most of what the workshops offered. There were several weavers from different parts of the country participating in the sessions. In one of them, I shared my own experiences of visiting the weavers, the conditions that I saw and the injustice of it all. When I finished, to my surprise and embarrassment, all the weavers clapped, and one of them said emotionally, "This young girl understands our lives very well"

Many young activists attending the conference were pleasantly surprised to find an 'urban weaver.' A group of us visited a weaving com-munity in Sarai Mohana, a village near Benaras that wove brocade saris. The dark, ill-lit mud houses of weaver homes produce some of the most exquisite, grand works of textile art — the Benaras brocades. It is almost as if all the light that is absent in their homes is expressed in the grand, bright and intricately woven brocades. I made some notes on technical aspects and talked to the weavers about other things. It was the same *story* here too. The industry had a flourishing market and patronage from the Mughal period until fairly recently. Since it was such a vibrant industry even in the twentieth century, the inhabitants of Sarai Mohana, who were primarily fishermen, learnt weaving as a secondary occupa-tion from the Muslim weavers

of Benaras. Nowadays, neither fishing nor weaving was giving them enough returns. ‘Where are the fish, nowadays? The Ganga has no fish...’ a weaver-fisherman lamented.

The holy city of Benaras is an experience in itself. The beautiful Ganga, the narrow streets and bustling businesses, the chaos, the filth and the drains, the rail bridge over the Ganga, the *ghats* or steps leading to the river, the Kashi Vishwanath Temple, the forts, priests and people, cows and high-rise rickshaws — life with its variety, beauty and serenity seems to coexist with filth, pollution and callousness in this city.

The *Karthik Pournami* celebrations were the grand finale of the trip. We went on a boat ride on the river watching the steps of the *ghats* illuminated with thousands of oil lamps. *Ganga pooja* and various other public functions were being organized on the main *ghats*. People were lighting oil lamps and letting them afloat in the waters. The full moon turned white from a copper-red, as if reflecting the light from all these lamps. From the boat, it looked as if the river and the sky had merged into each other - one with its golden *diyas* (oil lamps) and the other with its silver *diyas*.

My visits to weaver communities gave me a real-life exposure to their social and economic conditions, apart from coming to know of some technical aspects of weaving. I wrote in my diary, ‘I had always felt that I wanted to weave, just weave, and become a good weaver. After seeing the unbelievable skills and poor living conditions of weavers, I am having second thoughts. Perhaps, I’ll never be able to become as good as them in weaving and even if I did, I may need to do something else to earn a comfortable living. But, I should do something to help this community from whom I’ve learnt so much. But what?’

More Projects

With my field visits I got interested in the history of the handloom industry as I knew that the present day scenario had to be understood from a historical perspective. I started reading articles and got an opportunity to attend a series of lectures on the history of Indian textiles by Dr. Aarti Kawlra at the Stella Maris College. Her lectures were engaging and provided insights into the dynamics of the Indian textile industry vis-a-vis other movements like the arts and crafts movement and the Industrial Revolution in Europe. The social and economic conditions that existed in textile communities during British colonial rule and details of how the industry was reorganized to make trade easier for the British were also discussed in depth. I learnt about swadeshi and the boycott of foreign textiles, the movement for khadi and the cultural renaissance led by Ananda K. Coomaraswamy.

I used to visit Dr. Kawlra’s home in Chennai several times, and she shared some of her research papers and material with me. One day, we had a very interesting ‘show and tell’ session. She brought a huge cloth bundle that looked somewhat like a ‘dhobi’ (laundry) bundle. And lo! It was full of treasures. There were some exquisite traditional and contemporary saris from different parts of India that she had acquired from family and friends. She explained the characteristic features of some of the saris and introduced me to the colourful, myriad world of Indian woven textiles. It was a sheer feast for the eyes and filled my soul with the urge to learn more about them.

The PPST Foundation was working on a project to develop decentralized spinning machines. In order to transport the cotton from the farm to the spinning mill, it is compressed into bales at high pressure and temperature. Interestingly, at the spinning mill, the cotton bales need to undergo the reverse process of 'opening' to recreate the loose fibre, which is then used to make the yarn. This leads to the cotton becoming weaker and the yarn getting costlier. If a village based, decentralized spinning mill could be used in areas that grow cotton, the spinner would have a ready market in the weaver, and the weaver in turn would have access to quality yarn directly from the local spinner. Mr Ramakrishna, an engineer, was one of the key people involved in developing the entire set of machines. When I visited the office in Chennai, he allowed me to see a working demonstration of his mini-spinning mill while explaining the various processes involved in making yarn from raw cotton.

After that I had a very interesting and insightful conversation with him on the evolution of spinning and weaving technologies from a historical perspective. Mr Ramakrishna is a soft-spoken man and answered all my questions with complete clarity. I have always had doubts on which category of cloth - mill-woven or hand-woven — was technically superior; how synthetic cloth was so cheap when compared to hand-loom, and so on. We discussed in detail why the power loom sector had overtaken its handloom counterpart in recent years. Ramakrishnan also explained how the synthetic boom came from the technology point of view, about the technical superiority of good hand-spun, throw-shuttle cloth (such as made in Pondur, Andhra Pradesh); about various Acts that were in place for the handloom sector, but were poorly implemented; and about the British role in the strategic dismantling of the spinning and handloom sector in colonial India. The PPST library also had reading material on the subject that I took home to read.

Though I had no special affinity to *khadi*, I began reading '*The Economics of Khadi*' written by Gandhi to understand why he believed so much in hand spinning as a powerful tool to gain India's independence. Gandhi's thoughts were crystal clear, the strategies simple, and the results he expected logical. I also read *Hind Swaraj* at about the same time. In both these books, Gandhi gives our civilization clear warnings - that the hunger to modernize putting pursuit of profit and material wealth above everything else would be disastrous; going down this particular path will lead to more hunger and marginalization of the majority, and so on. I couldn't help thinking how we have ended up doing precisely the very things that he warned us against. Of course, some of his ideas are very hard-hitting and difficult to digest, yet his core thinking struck me as true and original, and perhaps in need of being reinvented for our times. Especially since I was seeing all the disastrous things that he had predicted already occurring around me, I started wondering how different it would have been had we gone the Gandhian way?

My technical skills in weaving were still limited to what I had learnt in the School. I came to know about the Weavers' Service Centre (WSC) in Chennai that offers a one-month training course in weaving, dyeing and block printing. WSCs have been established throughout the country to train weavers sent by cooperative societies in complex weaving, dyeing and other required skills. In February 1997, I enrolled in the weaving programme. In this training, I learnt a whole range of common and fancy weaves that could be used to make different kinds of cloth. I made friends with a senior weaver who taught me the basics of jacquard weaving and how one could convert paper designs into weavable motifs. That was complicated!

I was always fascinated with how weavers weave floral designs and 'butas' (motifs) into their cloth. Shankaran *anna* was not very familiar with that kind of weaving, and suggested that I could get the help of the Weavers Service Centre. After discussing with Gautam *anna*, I went to the centre and requested the Deputy Director to send one of their weavers to help us set up and weave some simple designs at the weaving section at the School. After some discussion he agreed, and soon a weaver came and spent four days teaching me and *anna* how to set up the *adai*, a warp lifting arrangement for weaving designs. We decided to weave a simple *rudraksh* (a circular motif that looks like a rosary bead) design on the borders of both sides of the cloth. The School paid for all the extra equipment needed and for the services of the weaver. I realized that the entire process was a little too complicated for me to do all by myself, but the exercise helped me understand all the steps involved. Oh, my joy to see the first beautiful round *rudraksh* develop on the cloth as I wove! Later, I presented a bright table cloth with *rudraksh* borders to Gautam *anna* for his office table.

A feeling of 'It-might-be-useful-in-the-future' prompted me to do a 15-day computer-aided design course at NIFT, Chennai, in July 1999 using the software 'Fashion Studio'. After my initial inhibitions with the computer, I began to enjoy it thoroughly, except that I did not find staring into the computer the whole day a very pleasant thing to do.

My days in Chennur

As my three years in Chennai were drawing to a close, it was time for me to go out for some field experience. I wanted to work along with weavers in a community set-up. What was a subject of study for me was an integral part of the lives of weaver communities. Working with such traditional practitioners would give me a different learning environment and enable me to understand the perspective of the weaver communities. I especially wanted to learn pit loom weaving, because the pit loom is considered the traditional 'mother' loom and is one of the most widely used looms in India. I turned to Uzramma for help in this matter. After a few weeks, Uzramma told me that I could work with weavers in Chennur, a small town in the Adilabad district of Andhra Pradesh. Dastkar Andhra had a long-term association with the weavers there and they discussed the possibility of my working there for a few months.

It was all very exciting — the whole idea of living with new people from a very different society, setting up a pit loom, and making cloth fine enough to be worn as a dress! It was indeed a unique opportunity because it is not usually possible to actually work in an artisan community just like that, encroaching upon their time and energy.

I went to Chennur on 11 March, 1999. I was put up in Shri Satyanarayananagaru's house, which was a kilometre away from the weavers' colony. The same evening, Samatha, Satyanarayananagaru's daughter, introduced me to two men, Odhelu and Satthanna. 'Odhelu will be teaching you,' she said.

I looked at him. Odhelu was a frail, young man in his thirties! I had actually been expecting that an old retired weaver would have agreed to teach me because he might not be doing much else. Uzramma had informed them about my arrival so that they would have a pit loom ready. They had come to see for themselves if 'that girl' had actually arrived!

“The loom is not yet set up. I’ll start gathering things for the loom from tomorrow,’ Odhelu said. ‘We didn’t think that someone would actually come to learn pit loom weaving,’ he smiled.

‘Good, I’ll learn everything from the beginning then,’ I said. Thus began my stint at Chennur. In my new routine, I would leave Sathyanarayananagaru’s house after breakfast at nine in the morning, return for lunch at 1.30 p.m., leave again at 3.00 p.m. and return at 6.30 p.m. Effectively, I spent six to seven hours everyday in the weavers’ colony.

Where should we set up the loom?

As I have remarked earlier, the pit loom is one of the most widely used handlooms in the country. The weaver sits on the floor and operates the pedals that are set inside a pit dug into the floor, hence the name. After considering various options, we decided to set up the loom in Odhanna’s house. But where? There was hardly any space except in the kitchen. Digging up a part of somebody’s kitchen for my sake? Oh no!

‘We have no other option, but this,’ Lakshmamma, Odhanna’s wife said, with a broad grin on her face, ‘It is okay.’

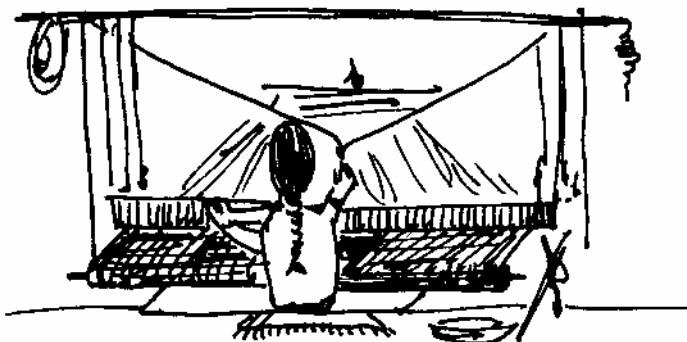
Next began the Tiunting and gathering’ for the pit loom accessories because the colony weavers were no longer using these looms. They had all switched to frame looms probably because they had stopped weaving traditional saris. While searching for accessories, I met Moti Ramchand, another pit loom weaver. Originally a weaver, he had gone on to do other things in search of a better livelihood. He had tried his hand at tailoring and even welding, but had returned to pit loom weaving. ‘Hands that ate used to delicate, fine work cannot do such things,’ he said, explaining why he got back to the ‘rhythm of his life’. He agreed to lend me whatever spare equipment he had.

In the meanwhile, I started getting the warp ready for weaving. Many techniques were similar to that of the frame loom (on which I started off in Chennai), with minor changes. Though I was slow initially, I started picking up quite soon. Once Odhanna’s father was watching me do the wrapping. ‘Hmmn, looks like she does know some work, else it would not be possible to learn so quickly,’ he commented. I was thrilled. Imagine receiving a compliment from a seasoned weaver!

After preparing the warp, it needs to be sized. Sizing is the process by which starch-containing gruel water is sprinkled on the warp, and then stroked across with the help of a special brush made out of the roots of the plant from which broomsticks are also made. The sizing technique is what makes even fine Indian cotton fabrics durable and strong. From day one, every other weaver I met always warned me: ‘Sizing is the most difficult part. If you can do it, you have learnt weaving.’ So, I too looked forward to learning sizing. ‘Come early tomorrow, by six o’clock in the morning. We will size the warp,’ said Odhanna as I was leaving to go back to Satyanarayananagaru’s house one evening.

I showed up religiously at six the following morning. First, Lakshmamma helped me prepare *a jowar* (sorghum, millet) gruel. Then, Odhanna and I got busy in spreading the warp between two poles on the street in front of his house with the help of another weaver. After the warp was straightened out and made free of tangles, he started sprinkling diluted gruel water on the warp. Following that, the two of them ran from one end of the warp to the other, brushing the yarn.

Though it seems pretty simple to watch - two men holding the heavy brush on either ends of the warp and running along the warp from end to end - there are several things to be kept in mind. The pressure applied on the brush has to be even on either sides and the brush has to be absolutely straight. What's more, the sprinkling of the gruel water followed by the brushing action has to be done several times. The timing is extremely important and the gruel-wet yarn has to be brushed before the sun's heat dries up the warp — which is why sizing is done usually early in the morning — or else you will be left with starch-dried clumped up warp! I tried my hand doing a few rounds.



ON THE PITLOOM AT CHENNUR

As Odhanna fashioned the warp skilfully, a little crowd had gathered around us - many of them erstwhile weavers. They stood watching the whole procedure with nostalgia because many, in their childhood and teenage years, would have assisted their own fathers and grandfathers in sizing. Today, very few of them were still in the ancestral trade and many no longer possessed the skill to size cotton yarn for the pit loom. Some of the younger generation were as new to sizing as myself. The end result of sizing is amazing. The warp looks like silk — well groomed, like a girl walking out of a beauty parlour after a facial!

‘Have you finished?’ Lakshmamma asked, laying the plates for break-fast. ‘Since the two of us are here, we did it faster,’ said Odhanna with an encouraging smile.

As my initial preparations for weaving were on, we managed to get hold of Brahmayya, the carpenter who could make looms. It was wonderful to see him fabricate all kinds of equipment with the simple tools he had. He even made a measuring scale on the spot! Brahmayya put up the support structure and other components required for our loom.

The next day, we worked on setting up the loom. Even slight differences in the height or width could result in a defective loom and hence everything had to be done accurately. Yet, a measuring tape, a hammer and a chord were the only implements Odhanna used! His young children, Ganesh and Lavanya, amidst a lot of giggling, helped in digging the pit and shovelling the mud. By the end of the day, all of us had sores on our hands!

Weaving at last! After a small ceremony and prayer, I sat at the loom. I was not used to weaving cloth so wide and I wondered if the shuttle would go from one end to the other at all. When I pulled at the chord and heard the *thak* sound the shuttle makes when it hits the box on the other side, my heart skipped a beat!

During the first two days, I was very uncomfortable at the loom. But once I got accustomed, weaving on the pit loom was a sheer delight. Occasionally, Odhanna would take my place to do minor repairs to the loom and would go on weaving, looking as excited as a child until I pestered him to get up. 'When I sit at a pit loom, I don't feel like getting up,' he would say.

The best thing about Odhanna - or other weavers for that matter is the way his hands are in tune with his brain. While I usually struggled when it came to converting what was in my mind into something that works, he did such seemingly complicated jobs with astonishing ease.

I wove at a snail's pace since the warp ends would often snap. Thus I was spending more time rejoicing the broken ends than on the weaving itself. Gradually, fewer ends would snap and I developed confidence. Thus I took almost six days to weave six metres - for which weavers usually take less than a day!

Weavers' Tales

The weavers' colony consisted of about 40 households - all *Padmasalis* by caste. Most of the men and women worked in the Chennur Chenetha Sangam (the Handloom Cooperative Society). A few of them had shifted to other occupations and worked as auto drivers, Singareni coal mine workers or seasonal land labourers.

I visited the Sangam one day with the women. By then I had finished weaving my first warp and was introduced to others as 'a girl from Chennai, who has set up a loom, can weave and also does all the pre-loom operations by herself. These women would come in the afternoons to chat with Lakshmmrna and had watched me at work. 'Hmmm... not bad,' said some. 'Why do you want to learn this and suffer,' said others.

The warp yarn was being wound on to bobbins in a tin-roof shed adjoining the main hall. By ten in the morning the heat would penetrate the tin shed and it would be unbearably hot. The old women on the job simply took their *pallus* off their shoulders. The main hall had about fifty looms placed extremely close to each other, all working at the same time. It was a little factory and all that mattered here was speed. That was what would fill their pockets. Their bodies shook violently as they wove to achieve greater and greater speeds.

While doing my pre-loom work, Odhanna and I had a number of conversations, and other weavers who came to his house also joined us and offered their wisdom.

The most frequently asked question was 'Why are you learning weaving and such a primitive form at that?' I wasn't sure myself. I told them that I wanted to learn a skill involving the use of my hands and it just happened that I chose weaving. I was here to learn pit loom weaving because it was the 'mother' loom and I wanted to understand the evolution of today's weaving technologies from that perspective.

We went on to discuss issues like machinery, labour displacement and occupational shift to other jobs. Odhanna said in a prophetic manner, 'When the coal reserves are over, machines cannot run. If we stop working on our looms now, we would have forgotten everything by then.' We also talked about Gandhi's ideas about machinery - that a machine must make things easier for the worker but not jeopardize their livelihood.

Half-smiling Odhanna narrated his decision to fit a motor to the pirn-winding charkha so that Lakshmamrna would find it easy to wind yarn. Doesn't it seem very similar to the story of the inventor of the sewing machine?!

Reflecting on the dignity of weavers, Odhanna narrated a personal experience. 'When we go to public functions, we feel ashamed to say that we make our living by weaving. Even those who are worse off than me ask me why I weave. What can I do except lower my head? I have no answer to that question,' he said. 'But things changed after we met *Amma* (Uzramma),' he continued. 'She brought our confidence and dignity back.'

'Would you also teach your sons, Ganesh and Mahesh weaving?' I asked.

'No, no,' he replied hastily. 'Let them study and do something else. Let them not suffer like us.'

The weavers also have interesting folklore associated with their origin and with their other customs and traditions. *Padmasalis* are the descendants of the ancient sage Markandeyuiu. His son, Bhavanarishi, is supposed to have devised the concept of a loom and woven the first cloth.

Lakshmamma became a very good friend and companion to me. She used to watch me at work and keep me company in the afternoons while winding pirns and bobbins for Odhanna. One day, she was particularly impressed with one of the designs I had woven and excitedly brought her friends to see it on the loom. 'See... doesn't it look like a sari?' she said, her eyes shining.

I began to coach Mahesh, Odhanna's second son, for his English every evening. He was in the seventh class. I realized then how difficult it is to teach English - how can you explain why 'P U T' is 'put' and 'G U T' is 'gut'?

Second Innings in Chennur

My stint in Chennur was planned for a total of two months. After the first month I went back to Chennai, and returned after a gap of 3-4 months. 'So, you've come back?' people enquired, as I walked again into the familiar environs of the weavers' colony. This time I wanted to try some simple variations on the loom and take on the challenge of weaving a finer yarn. I wanted to use yellow yarn for the warp, but rats had in the meanwhile damaged all the yarn. Nevertheless, I was still keen on that yellow and decided to use it anyway. While winding the damaged yarn, it kept snapping, but I went on patiently.

Patience? That was the last word in my dictionary. I wondered why I was not half as patient while doing other things. But in weaving, it is the foremost virtue required. If I were impatient while weaving, I would not be able to proceed to the next stage. But is that patience? I think the right term is perseverance. With weaving, perhaps like all art, you have to surrender yourself to master it.

When my mother asked Odhanna about the quality of my work, the only remark he made was, 'She is interested in weaving, works hard and has lot of patience!' Sometimes when many ends would snap while weaving, I would get totally exhausted at the mere sight of them. In great frustration and anger, I would break into a song and begin all over

again. Whoever said that people hum only when they are happy? Well, I often sang when I was really tired and angry, mentally and physically.

For the *Dasara* festival, I accompanied Odhanna and his daughter, Gayatri to his native village, Kusnepalli. This is one of the centres for *tussar silk* weaving. Tussar is a wild silk of wheatish colour and uneven texture. It was absolutely fascinating to see silk being reeled off from cocoons by hand. It required perfect coordination and concentration to wind the yarn accurately in a figure of eight on to a frame held in the weaver's left hand and then to give just the right twist to the yarn on the thigh, using the right hand!

Odhanna had been weaving since his childhood. While other boys of his age went to school and played games, he worked on his loom. His peers would peep in through the little window near the loom and ask him to join them in their play. When he told them to come inside instead, they would simply run away.

'Now do you know what they are doing? They are earning lakhs. And I, after working for so many years...' he smiled. His remarks had a profound influence on me and raised many disturbing questions. I mused over them on our way back to Chennur.

We often feel sorry when artisan-craftsmen are taking up other jobs and letting the craft die with them. But rarely do we realize how we ourselves actively contribute to this scenario. Approximately 13 million people in our country earn their livelihood in the handloom sector, which is second only to agriculture in livelihood generation. The sector is also one of the largest foreign exchange earners for our country. But then, with technological developments taking place every day, the day may not be far off when machines will be able to carry out even those special techniques of which the weavers are so proud. Then what do we do with this skilled work force that has perfected its art over generations? 'Survival of the fittest, Samyuktha. Times have changed. What else do you expect?' a friend once said when I discussed this issue with him.

In today's globalization regime, artisans are told to either produce exotic stuff that can be exported or move into 'other sectors'. I've often wondered why potters, weavers and other traditional craft persons always need to produce exceptional work in order to prove their mettle and make a living. And yet they are made redundant the moment there is a product that machines can make as well. When mediocre clerks, government officials, etc., are surviving, and surviving quite well, why has it become impossible for the average weaver to survive in a similar manner?

Contrary to Government claims, I learnt in my discussions with other experts that the so called 'other sectors' are neither equipped enough nor interested in accommodating the poor. The artisan often ends up losing his ancestral skill on one hand and just keeps hopping from one occupation to another, from one technology to another, hoping for better returns. Sometimes, in the cities, it is not surprising to see rickshaw *wallas*, construction workers and beach hawkers who were once professional weavers. Lost in thought, the long journey back to Chennur seemed much shorter.

One day, after we came back, I accompanied Odhanna to the vat house to see indigo dyeing. Chennur weavers who worked for Dastkar Andhra were trained in natural dyeing using the traditional vat-dyeing method. In this method, I was told, the indigo shade became deeper and the colour fastness improved vastly, but the dye vat itself stinks like hell!

‘Even our children don’t come near us. Go away, you stink, they say!’ said Sathanna laughing. ‘But this is our work, how can we say we can’t do it,’ he added. Their nails are permanently stained blue. In fact, every-thing about them was blue - their bed sheets, shirts and even the dust in their house!!

The second month in Chennur soon came to an end. It is quite impossible to capture the learning in Chennur in the few pages of experi-ences I’ve shared here.

How can I describe how it felt when I gave three metres of cloth to my weaving master, Shankaran *anna*, back at Chennai? Or when my father got a *kurta* stitched with the material? Or when my parents presented a kurta each to Siddharaj Dhadda, the eminent Gandhian-socialist and Harsh Mander uncle? How can I share in words the joy and pride felt when I wore an outfit stitched from the cloth I had woven and heard people exclaim unbelievingly, ‘What! You *wove* it yourself?’ My younger sister looked approvingly at me and said, ‘Now, I can tell everyone that my sister is a weaver.’

4 Rallying for the valley

Every year the School takes its students for trips lasting one or two weeks to places where they can meet people associated with social struggles. It could be a trek to the hills of Garhwal to understand the Tehri dam issue or a walk along the eastern coast of India to understand the ecological threats associated with intensive prawn farming. A visit to the Narmada valley - site of a major resistance to the construction of a series of large dams on the river — was organized in September-October 1997 I joined a group of students from class XI and XII accompanied by two teachers, Sumitra *akka* and Ramesh *anna* on the two-week trip.

Some experiences educate. Others entertain. Some electrify and enhance the quality of life. Some engender, even sustain, ideals towards which we aspire. What if a single experience encapsulated all this and more? Such was the Narmada experience for me.

The idea of going to the valley to see for myself something I had only read about was enthralling. During our tour of the valley we visited many villages, many times walking from one to another, discussed issues with the affected villagers and also met some of the leaders of the Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA). Prominent among them were Medha Patkar and Baba Amte.

What did the Sardar Sarovar dam mean to the people who lived along the banks of the river Narmada? How did it challenge their life-styles and their rights? Sanjay Sangvi, an NBA activist, showed us facts and figures, and study reports and analyses prepared by the Narmada Valley Development Authority (NVDA) in support of the dam as well as studies subsequently carried out by social activists and environmentalists. The latter showed how the whole project was based on false promises and assumptions and how it would displace lakhs of people, leaving many of them socially and culturally uprooted. It would also submerge thousands of hectares of virgin forest land and fertile fields.

What struck us in our conversations with the villagers was that they seemed to be aware of everything that was happening in and around the world — from beauty contests to the orders passed from time to time by the Supreme Court in connection with the construction of the dam. These were the people who boldly stood up for their rights, demanding explanations as to who stood to benefit and at whose cost? Did they always

have to be losers, the poorest of the poor — the dalits and the *adivasi* (the tribals)? Didn't they have a voice too? How could the government draw up such a massive plan to build 1300 dams across the Narmada without consulting the people who actually reside on its banks? All that the government did was to barge into their huts in the middle of the night and tell them that the waters would be rising and that they would have to vacate within the next couple of days. And what did the farmer see when he went to his fields the next morning? That the entire crop had been razed to the ground by bulldozers.

The villagers received us with moving hospitality. On one occasion, we were pleasantly surprised to see an entire village panchayat waiting to receive us at midnight. We had a two-hour discussion with them despite the hour! Medha Patkar was continuously on the move but dropped by to meet us. I remember the awe with which we sat and listened to her. Some of us initially had a pen and a notebook in our hands, but we soon put them aside. Where was the need to write, when we could imprint each of her words on our minds — words she spoke with so much passion in her desire to reach out to people. How did one carry that energy and passion back to people in Chennai?

Medha Patkar had been a student of the Tata Institute of Social Sciences. She came to know about the Sardar Sarovar dam, which was being publicized as Gujarat's life-line. But when she toured the three affected states of Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra as a part of her studies, startling facts emerged, it came as a shock to her when she discovered **that** none of the villagers in whose very land the dam was going to be constructed knew about it. What started as a simple tour sparked off an array of questions concerning the development policies of the government and also led to research and other studies by experts in the field.

It was then that she decided to go from village to village speaking to people, telling them about the project, and urging them to find out how it would impact them. She said that initially the villagers were so suspicious of her that they even refused her drinking water after a tiring walk from one village to another. But now, these were the same people, who, with their heads held high, shouted (*Doobenge, par hatenge nahin*) (We will drown but we will not move!) What was amazing for me was that this one woman alone had so much determination and conviction that she had succeeded in mobilizing the poorest of the poor of not one but three states to demand their rights. Medha Patkar has fought thus with untiring perseverance for more than two decades, with the people and for the people. My thoughts were echoed in one comment that a villager in Piplodh made: 'You might think that Medha didi is leading us. That is not true. She is walking along with us.'

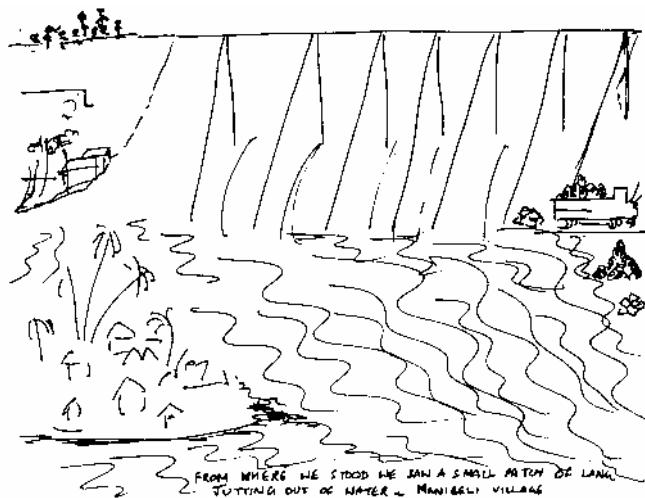
One day we had to cross the river and go to the other side to reach a tribal hamlet. It was dusk and the sun was setting beyond the hills. The river was still and the silence of the moment was enchanting. The means of crossing the river was a *doonga*, which looked very much like a split tea pod. Our driver sighted one in the distance and called out to the boatman, and the *doonga* started moving towards us. The driver warned us, 'You have to sit absolutely still. If you move this way and that, the *doonga* will topple. Then you will go into the river, not across!' He really scared us and we wondered whether to cross or not. I ended up staying back as I was feeling tired and unwell, but some others made it across.

Suddenly the silence was broken by the leathery flapping of wings. We saw the apparent silhouettes of birds, but there was something unusual about the way they were moving their wings; it appeared quite unreal. As they moved closer, we were surprised to discover that they were actually huge bats, as big as vultures — their majestic wings in slow motion, as in the shots you see sometimes in the movies.

The day did come when we finally visited the site of the Sardar Sarovar dam, one of the latest 'Temples of Modern India'. Since the Supreme Court had ordered a stay on the construction of the dam, the mammoth structure lay half finished, giving people hope that some miracle would still happen - if people willed it, if God willed it. But the canal construction work was still going on apace. That showed how confident the government was about eventually completing the dam itself.

From where we stood we could see a small patch of land jutting out of the water within the dam's reservoir on it we could spot a few huts and palm trees. That was Manibeli village, one of the first settlements to be submerged after the dam construction commenced. People had earlier left Manibeli for the rehabilitation site allotted to them by the authorities but disgusted, disappointed and angry with what had been offered, had decided instead to return. They felt this small remnant of their village was much better than what they had been offered as compensation. This had been their home after all.

A dusty road led to Krishnapura - a rehabilitation site. Tin-roof houses for men and cattle alike and the skeleton of a hospital dotted the dusty landscape. But what really disturbed me were the dejected and bitter expressions of the people there.



'We owned land earlier. Now we have become mere wage labourers answerable to the master for everything we do,' a villager informed us.

Till today, a large number of the displaced are yet to get adequate compensation, either in cash or land. Even a Krishnapura has been denied to many. Fishermen living downstream and many of those who have been uprooted for construction of the canals are not considered 'project-affected' and hence not eligible for rehabilitation.

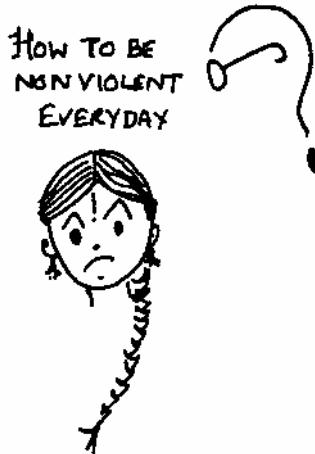
After we came back to Chennai, we organized many postcard campaigns and protest demonstrations. We spoke to students in schools and colleges and showed them *Narmada Diary*, a documentary of the struggle by the noted filmmaker Anand Patwardhan. Every school and college interaction was a challenge because new perspectives always came up and students didn't hesitate to ask uneasy questions as we were of the same age group. I even went door-to-door collecting funds and signatures and selling photocopies of Arundhati Roy's article, "The Greater Common Good".

I came to know about a 'soap box' session that was organised regularly at a park in T. Nagar in Chennai. Apparently, anybody could make a speech on any topic to the audience. The 'soap box' was in a corner of the park and about 20-25 people had gathered in front of it. A speaker was standing on a raised platform (the soap box) complaining animatedly about having to pay to use the public latrines! Those who wanted to speak needed to sign up and provide their contact details. When my turn came, I made - in a smattering of Tamil - what was my first public speech in Chennai on the Narmada issue in front of the small audience. Since I was the only female in the gathering, all of them appreciated me and my attempts at speaking in Tamil. A secret admirer even sent greetings thereafter every festival season to my house!

It was also the only time that I succeeded in remembering numbers - the number of people who would be submerged, the water capacity of the Narmada basin, the acreage of the command area, what percentage of water would actually go to Kutch and Saurashtra for drinking water from the dam as promised, and a lot of such data to support my arguments. I have always had a mental block with math and numbers, but somehow this time, the numbers seemed to say, "*Samyuktha behen aage badho, hum tumhare saath hain* (Sister Samyuktha, go ahead. We are with you)." This was one of the common slogans of the Narmada Bachao Andolan generally used to show support to the person who was taking the lead in a particular phase of the movement.

Organizing protests and speaking in public was one way to understand the issue better. What was even more important for me was the constant self-questioning that came up while interacting with people. Often I would become emotional and defensive. Why wasn't the issue making sense to people? Many times I asked myself, 'What is the significance of the Narmada issue to me, staying in Chennai, hundreds of kilometres away from the whole struggle? Does it mean anything at all? If it does, how does one translate this experience into practical, personal action?'

There were many similar incidents happening all across India - stories of displacement of people to build flyovers, five-star hotels and many other similar projects associated with development. To me, the solution to all these issues seemed to point in one direction: we had to place limits on our needs, consume less and conserve more. Because if we wished to continue with this kind of development and life-style, we would need more and more resources and energy. These would have to come from more such projects that would gobble up even more of our natural resources and demand sacrifices from many more millions of *adivasis* and poor farmers. It was ironic that all these activities were being promoted by government in the name of development' (to eradicate poverty) when their benefits would only be available to those who could afford them.



The Narmada struggle also threw up another interesting question: how does one remain non-violent in day-to-day life, looking at non-violence not just as a buzz word associated with a historical movement and Gandhiji, but at a more personal and down-to-earth level. Did a non-violent external struggle and a non-violent internal struggle have similar dimensions?

In February 1999 came the shocking news. The Supreme Court of India delivered its interim verdict allowing the height of the Sardar Sarovar dam to be raised from 80.3 to 88 metres (the proposed final height is about 138 metres). The construction recommenced after a four-year stay. This allowed increase in height would result in the submergence of 1,500 families living in another 50-60 villages. All the basic issues — cost-benefit analysis, rehabilitation plans, environmental concerns — seemed to have been completely submerged in the Supreme Court's decision.

People in the Narmada valley decided to challenge this unjust submergence and to confront the governments for producing false affidavits regarding the status of resettlement and land availability to the court. They gave a call for a *satyagraha* in Domkhedi, a village in Maharashtra.

Following the developments in the valley, I was convinced that I had to be there in solidarity with the people. When I discussed another visit with my parents, they were very encouraging, especially since they were unable to go to the valley themselves. Accompanied by Aparna, a family friend, I set out for the valley again in late July 1999 - almost two years after my first visit. (Aparna and her husband Nagesh are two US-returned engineers who decided to live in a village and adopt a rural life-style. They chose to set up home in our village about ten years ago and they have become family ever since.)

As it nears Baroda in Gujarat, the train crosses the Narmada River. Looking out from my little window, I found the murky waters below a little frightening. I was going to participate in a *Satyagraha*. But what did *Satyagraha* really mean? This word - which had made Gandhiji an icon of the freedom movement — had no longer a mere historical meaning. It had become once again a part of the present. Would it mean fasting, silence, police encounters, maybe even submergence? I looked at the river again, wondering what lay ahead.

From Baroda we boarded a bus to the Satyagraha site at Domkhedi village in Maharashtra. We had to get down at Khadipani, walk up to Hapeshwar and then take a boat to Domkhedi. After a few hours, as we were wondering whether we had reached our first destination, a man boarded the bus and asked, 'Do you want to join Medha? For that you will have to get down at the next stop.' We thanked him for his help.

Then he queried again: 'Where are you from?'

'From Chennai,' we replied enthusiastically. We meant to convey, 'Even we care, we are with you.'

His tone however suddenly changed. '*Aap sabyahan kyon aate ho?* (Why do all you people come here?)' It took us a moment to realize that the man was not innocently enquiring why we were here, but was actually telling us to get lost. 'Don't you want us Gujaratis to prosper?' he went on. 'Would you allow us to do a similar thing in your state?'

I turned my face away and looked out of the window. I felt that in this single incident I had encountered the thinking of the people of Gujarat. They would obviously be angry because they had been made to believe that the Sardar Sarovar was an answer to all their water and power problems. Was I really meddling in their hopes for prosperity? But tell me, who was prospering at whose cost? *Why should the powerless he-come even more powerless and help the powerful become still more powerful?* Fifty years after independence, development in India had still not come to these tribal villages — there were still no schools, no roads, no electricity, no hospitals — and it definitely was not going to come with or after the Sardar Sarovar Project. I made up my mind that I would continue to fight against such injustice which brings destruction to many.

We got off at Khadipani and trekked amidst hills till we reached the river. As we stood waiting, a red motorboat with the blue flag and the NBA logo arrived. The villagers no longer used their *doongas* (tribal boats) as a mode of transport on this wide river: they had become too risky. The villagers could no longer call out to each other from either side of the river. It was no longer the river they knew. It was now a reservoir.

We finally reached Domkhedi from Baroda after travelling for almost the entire day. Loud cheering and slogans welcomed us. Six or seven metres from the waters, in a tent lit by a petromax lamp, a number of *adivasis*, activists and sixty other *satyagrahis* were having a discussion. Medha was there too. '*Doobenge par hatenge nahin*' (We will drown but we will not move!) They had resolved to face the rising waters, face injustice and even look defeat in the face if called upon in the circumstances.

I had to wait until dawn the next morning to witness the sheer beauty of the hills. It was as if an enlarged picture postcard had come to life right in front of me. The river - with villages nestled on both its sides — separated the hills which ranged all around. On one side of the river was Domkhedi village where we were staying. On the other side was Jalsindhi village. The grey reflection of the hills lay still in the water. Stubborn. *Doobenge par hatenge nahin?*

Many young students and working professionals from Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, Karnataka and Kerala as well as people from the near-by villages of the Nimad area had come several days earlier to participate in the *Satyagraha*. I was most impressed by an auto rickshaw driver who had come all the way from Kerala, pooling his own money, to

stand up for the cause. He entertained us with a magic show and transported us into a world in which the Sardar Sarovar dam simply disappeared and became a human chain instead, amidst loud cheering!

Pranaam (prayers) and *shramdaan* (physical labour), meeting and eating took place twice a day. Slogans were heard any time and anywhere.

'Arey bhai, koi naara lagao' somebody would say. (Brother, why don't you raise a slogan?)

'Vikas chahiye! Vinash nahin!! (We want development, not destruction) a hundred voices would thunder.

When we went walking in the hills, a little voice from one of the huts would echo, *'Amu akha...* and wait for us to say, *'Ek Che* (We are all... one).'

If we did not say *'Ek che?* the voice would repeat again, *'Amu akha* and we would have to answer the call.

The following day, the youngsters were given the responsibility of making arrangements for the 'Rally for the Valley' which was to be led by Arundhati Roy, the Booker prize-winner and author of the controversial article, "The Greater Common Good.' At once we set about a variety of chores, from making posters, banners and photo exhibition charts to filling barrels with drinking water. Taking the posters and banners with us, we set out to Jalsindhi village where the 'Rally for the Valley' would arrive the following day.

Jalsindhi and Neemgavhan villages *Jeevanshalas* (Schools of Life), initiated by the NBA. Guruji, the school teacher, showed us toys, story books and calendars made by the school children. Besides following the state-prescribed syllabus, they were also educated in the local *adivasi* history, the taxonomy of plants and animals in their area, tribal medicine and so on. "They even learnt to map their areas and thus understand their geography. 'When we teach children about historical wars, we only tell them about the king, his enemies and the land he conquered during his reign. Who talks about people?' Guruji asked. How I wish we had such options for learning in our schools!

We complete fourteen years in school, mostly studying things we don't apply in real life. In fact, we end up not learning a few things that are most important to the conduct of our lives. We learn to draw maps of America and Africa, but don't really know if our school is in the eastern part of the city or towards the north. We go into details of the micro structure of plants, but don't know how to grow and nurture one in practice. We eat a variety of new foods and wear fancy clothes every day, but have no idea how they are grown or who makes them. We study about diodes and capacitors, but are totally helpless when our fan or transistor stops working. We pass out of school, having never opened a bank account, booked a train ticket or applied for a telephone connection. Oh, how I wish we had learning in our schools that was more practical and meaningful to our lives!

The 'Rally for the Valley' reached Jalsindhi on 2 August 1999. The rally was prohibited from passing through Gujarat and it had to trek through a longer route to reach Jalsindhi which is in Madhya Pradesh. Police personnel were posted all along the route. The rally included students, professionals like doctors, engineers, bank employees, NGOs, media persons, artists, some foreigners too — concerned people and curious

people. Baba Maharia addressed the gathering and told us at length about the entire struggle.

Arundhati Roy looked quite exhausted, but her face was beaming with excitement and determination. To bring this group of people down to these abandoned tribal villages was a big achievement in itself. To me, Arundhati Roy was a heroine and I moved closer to catch a better glimpse of her. I was a big fan of her writing and enjoyed both her essays as well as the Booker Prize novel, *The God of Small Things*. I very much wanted to say to her that I loved her style (and her looks!), but could not gather enough courage to do so. I contented myself with gazing at her every few minutes.

The following day we gathered at Neemgavhan for a meeting. Arundhati Roy was presented with a basket containing a collection of seeds of all the grains grown in the valley. Medha spoke at the end. I noticed once again that special flavour which comes when she talks to the people, her people. It is very different from her public speeches elsewhere. Here she pours her soul out and involves everybody in the audience now and then with a 'What do you say, *kaka* (uncle)?'

Meanwhile, we got news that contempt charges might be slapped by the Supreme Court on the NBA and on Arundhati Roy. We all signed a memorandum which boldly stated that if contempt charges on the NBA were thought to be just, they should include all of us present there as well.

We were filled with a renewed energy and determination that we would not allow such massive destruction to continue.

'The Valley Shall Live! We Will Keep It Alive!'

5 J. Krishnamurti and G. Samyuktha

Reading the works of intellectuals, philosophers and thinkers is nowa-days far from the mind of a typical school or college-going student. I was no exception - perhaps it was the fear of being labelled a 'serious person' or an intellectual. In any case, we would rather talk about film stars, friends and feuds rather than delve deeper into the dilemmas and questions haunting our minds - which is what philosophy is all about in its true sense.

Fortunately, though I had not read much philosophy, I had an open mind about it. So when I was told that I had to do 'Krishnamurti study' as a part of my PHE, I agreed to it without a second thought, almost without understanding what was being called for. As it turned out, one of the best aspects of my PHE years turned out to be this exposure to some of the greatest works of philosophy and their influence on my personality.

The prospectus of the PHE programme reads: 'Area I: Philosophical — *involving an exploration of what it means to be a human being in the light of Krishnamurti's teachings. This area is transacted, through conversations and readings and watching video recordings of talks and dialogues. Supplementary reading of religious and philosophical material is also encouraged:*

The fact that we had Krishnamurti philosophy designated as 'Area I' gives an idea of the foremost objective of the PHE programme. The School, especially my counsellor G. Gautama, put maximum effort in this area.

Sometimes, it almost seemed as if Gautam Anna was only interested in what was happening from the 'K-angle'. In my weekly reports, he would quickly flip through the pages and his face would light up with an 'Ah!' when he saw the sub title, 'K-study'.

'So, what happened last week?' he would enquire. He listened to all my enthusiastic reports and achievements in weaving and other activities, but I am not sure if he heard them. The question might as well have been, 'What happened in your K-study last week?'

My K-study consisted of reading JK's writings and having discussions with either the teachers in the school or with others who were associated with the Krishnamurti Foundation. The first time I read JK in the quiet ambience of the study, it took me some time to fit myself into the groove of his language and thought. My first impression after reading JK was, 'My God, this man knows exactly how I think.' JK's thorough understanding of the ways of the human mind — the manner in which he dissects all human emotions by ruthless questioning, urging us to enquire into the depths of each emotion, makes us feel dizzy yet excited, as if we were skydiving.

Often, reading JK automatically triggered off a parallel thought process that would ask, 'Yes, true. But, does it work like that in this situation? Do I really work like that in this situation?' It could be something like this:

'The fact is that there is nothing certain. The actual state of every human being is uncertainty. Now why don't we accept it, and live with that?'

Sounds simple... but really how?

'Do you know what it means to live with it? Have you ever tried to live with something and not get used to it?'

Hmm... let me think. No, I always seem to get used to anything I live with - the people, the place, even the furniture.

'You know, one can get used to a tree, to the beauty of sunset... But to live with a tree, to see the sunset every day anew as though you are seeing it for the first time, with clarity, with an intensity — that requires not memory; it requires that you should look at it anew, each day, afresh, with an intensity'

But is that really possible? For example, if one of my friends has insulted me the day before, how can I interact with her as if nothing happened, afresh, without the memory of yesterday? Sometimes it may really not help if I don't carry any memory of the past into the present. If I am always going to lend money to someone who has never paid back till date, how can I lend money to him again, with a 'fresh mind'? When am I going to learn?

'So one has to live with uncertainty. Because, it is only the mind that is uncertain that is creative. When you live in that state of uncertainty, then you will see that you meet every problem of life at any level, any crisis, any challenge, with clarity, with swiftness.'

Makes sense, but what exactly does it mean to meet everything in the face — then and there? Does it mean that I should not plan for any-thing? Though the fact may be that everything is uncertain, everything also runs on plans, even free-format events are planned in some sense. For instance, my PHE programme has a certain structure. So what does it really mean, in a practical sense, to live with uncertainty?

It would go on like this. I would note down these questions, so that I could discuss them in my conversations with other teachers. My conversation partner would be a gentle guide, just focused enough to steer the conversation, but at the same time open, flexible and sensitive to my perspectives and reasoning. Many *annas* and *akkas* in the School were very good at this — Gautam, Prasad, Ananth, Sumitra, Padmavathy, Ramesh, Pushpa, Bina.

The topic for discussion could even be something that happened during the week - just about anything - which I keenly wanted to talk about. During one phase, I found myself very irritable and flustered. When I met up with the teacher, we started off by looking at what provoked it and if it was the symptom of something underlying. Then gradually I understood that I was constantly battling this great insecurity and fear about what if I didn't become a good weaver, a good something in life, and that the anxiety was manifesting itself in all sorts of irritable reactions.

As the conversation progressed, I realized that there was so much conflict within the because there was something that I had put in front of myself as 'the ideal', 'the successful' and I was subconsciously always trying to measure myself against that ideal, though I had chosen a so-called alternative route. There was this distance between 'what is' and 'what should be.' So how did I end this conflict? As we probed deeper, questions would get tougher. It was not that they were leading to clear cut answers, but that was the mystery and beauty of the whole process. Often we would, in each other's perspectives, see totally new dimensions of an issue and thereby of ourselves. In the end, I would tell myself, 'Ok, now I do understand my irritability better. Am I going to be less irritable tomorrow? Let me watch myself'

Sometimes, it would be one of JK's quotes that set me thinking and we would probe it at length. JK talked a great deal about the concept of 'You are the world' and that all the violence, restlessness and injustice about which we complain, are not external and 'out there', but within us. Therefore the change has to begin first within. Though it did make sense, I often wondered if I would have to wait and live with all the injustice in the world till each of us would be transformed into better human beings. I felt a certain urgency in doing something about the external world even while I watched myself as a human being. I was also particularly sympathetic to peoples' causes taken up by different social activists, and wondered what they would have to say to the 'You are the world' concept.

Many emotions and phenomena that JK wrote about — fear, insecurity, death, ego, authority, truth and so on — were particularly interesting to me. His thoughts on the 'mirror of relationship' were personally quite revealing. ... *to know oneself, one must be aware of oneself in action, which is relationship. You discover yourself, not in isolation, not in withdrawal, but in relationship — in relationship to society, to your wife, your husband, your brother, to man; but to discover how you react, what your responses are, requires an extraordinary alertness of mind, a keenness of perception.*'

For the first time, I was looking at myself in my relationships with others — what Krishnamurti calls 'watching' without being judgemental: how I conducted myself in certain situations, why I behaved that way or why I behaved in a certain manner with some people and differently with others. The prospect of 'watching' the self can be extremely exhilarating as well as exhausting as you discover yourself anew.

At times, there would be fundamental questions that intrigued me. ‘Why all this emphasis on knowing more about myself? Why should I know more about myself, if at the end of it, I have to anyway remain non-judgmental and just watch myself?’ Nevertheless, different explor-ative threads of such discussions and readings made me think very hard about many facets of my own life, many times forcing me out of my known comfort zones. Needless to say, I enjoyed conversations far more than reading. They were typical of the process that JK describes when he speaks of both the teacher and student exploring together’ and ‘walking as two friends.’

J. Krishnamurti always laid stress on ‘listening’ and on an ‘atten-tive mind’ that absorbs like a sponge. *‘You have to listen with care, with an intensity that does not pervert, which does not translate, which does not compare; you actually need to be in a state of acute communication, in a state of communion, with yourself as with the speaker.’* I realized how inattentive I generally was when I started observing myself. I noticed myself either switching off or judging or comparing what the other person was saying, halfway through a conversation, without listening with ‘total at-tention.’ How does one train one’s mind to be attentive all the time? Can one really listen with one’s soul and heart — listen to people, to nature, to oneself — without being judgmental?

Ahalya Chari was a long time associate of JK and was one of my favourite K conversation friends. She was in her late seventies and always spoke with amazing clarity, however complex the issue. She had the knack of ‘walking’ with you through an issue, while throwing up fresh perspectives.

I was particularly moved by the Independence Day address she gave at the School. After an anecdotal introduction on what it was like to live under British rule in those days, she touched upon the very important question of what independence meant to her and to all of us in a personal way. How independent are we really in the mind? Have we been suc-cessful in breaking away from the shackles of prejudice? Are we indepen-dent in the way we think, and how we work? Is our education preparing us to think independently, and is there freedom of thought and action, as Rabindranath Tagore prayed for in his celebrated poem, ‘Where the mind is without fear’? I started pondering about independence with a fresh perspective.

I used to visit Ahalya Chari at her home in the Theosophical Society for conversations. On my birthday, she asked me to swing by for a few minutes. While I sat in the living room, she went in and came back with a watch. “This is an old watch that I used to wear,” she said. I wanted to give it to someone who would be certain to use it well. Happy Birthday.’ She tied the watch to my wrist. Though I would have loved to wear it, I found the dial itself was as large as my wrist. I had to pass it on to my father, who gladly started wearing it.

After some time, the JK conversations became sort of routine. The process was getting structured, which I resisted and avoided. I remember telling a teacher once, ‘Gautam anna wants me to have a conversation with you this week. But I don’t want to talk about anything.’ Though conversations continued, they didn’t happen as regularly as they did dur-ing the first two years of the PHE.

I didn’t read all of J. Krishnamurti’s works partly because there was just so much to read; but from the several topics I read I got a sense of his philosophy and started appreciating and internalizing some things almost subconsciously. Many times in

discussions with the family in our village, I would often say something that had a definite 'K' angle to it even without realizing it. 'Hmmn... J. Krishnamurti speaking,' my father would say mischievously!

Besides JK, I read many other intellectually stimulating books recommended by Gautam *anna*, like the *Commentary on the Katha Upanishad*, *Sophie's World*, Jostein Gaarder, *Plato's Dialogues*, John Steinbeck's books and Richard Bach's *Jonathan Livingston Seagull*.

Towards the end of the PHE programme, a panel of five teachers, my friend Vinuta and my counsellor Gautam *anna* interviewed me. Together we looked back at all that I had learnt in the PHE programme — both from the point of view of my subjects and otherwise.

My learning could be summed up in the two comments that I made then, in my concluding interview.

It is clear in my mind today, as J.K. says that freedom comes with responsibility. If one was to look at the last three years, I probably had more freedom than any of my peers to explore and do what I wanted to do. But yet, that freedom came with its cousin, responsibility. In order for me to make sense of the freedom and live my freedom the way I wanted, I had to take things into my hands with complete responsibility. And today, I see the value of that freedom clearer than ever.

'As a person, I used to perceive most matters in black and white. However, today I see every issue as having many sides, be it nuclear war or a beauty contest. Perhaps it has left me more confused and uncertain about many things but I understand that reality is complex and being confused is not all that negative.'

As a parting comment one of the panellists said, "There is a growing sense of clarity from your confusions."

I sincerely hope that is happening. And I believe it will continue to happen.

6 A degree along the way

When I graduated from high school in July 1996, I had never heard of a correspondence degree, let alone about the Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU). The PHE programme required the student to complete a degree through correspondence. IGNOU was the immediate choice because I was told it was the best, and because it also offered a Bachelor's degree in biology and other sciences. The School knew noth-ing more than this, so I set out on my own to discover more details.

After finding my way to the IGNOU regional office in Chennai, I took a detailed look at the prospectus and found that they did offer a three-year Bachelor's degree programme in life sciences. But there were a problem. The academic year at IGNOU commenced in January, which meant that it would be another six months before I could register and start. Therefore, it also meant that I would complete my B. Sc. only in December 1999 — six months later than a regular college-going B. Sc. student. 'Oh, no,' I whined. The PHE programme had now become for all practical purposes three and a half years, instead of three! Nevertheless, I dutifully enrolled for the life sciences programme. I had decided on the PHE and could not now go back just because I was upset about the time-lines.

There was additional trouble soon. The study centre allotted to me — where I would have to go for contact classes, laboratory work and examinations — was a college in Tiruchi, a city that is almost ten hours overnight journey by train from Chennai! The laboratory courses and examinations would even require me to stay for a few days in Tiruchi. What was I going to do? When I discussed this problem with Ananth *anna*, he suggested that I could stay with his sister's family in Tiruchi. That was a generous offer, though I didn't see it being a practical solution to the problem, unless there was some way I could change my study centre to a college in Chennai itself. My continuing the IGNOU programme, and to some extent, the PHE itself depended on that.

I soon got a notice to attend the orientation programme at the study centre in Tiruchi. While on the train, I was very anxious about how the whole thing was going to work out. This was also the first time I had booked a train ticket all by myself and travelled all alone. After the orientation programme, I spoke to the IGNOU regional assistant director about my problem. I didn't have to worry so much. He immediately assured me that he would get the authorities to reassign my study centre to DG Vaishnav College in Chennai. That was great news and thus I began my courses with IGNOU.

The Open University follows a credit system. I needed to complete a total of 96 credits to earn my bachelors' degree. Some subjects called 'foundation courses' were compulsory and constituted a total of 24 credits - humanities and social sciences, science and technology, English and one Indian language (I chose Telugu). They had to be completed in the first year of study itself. I had to complete 24 credits from allied sciences like physics, chemistry and mathematics along with 48 credits for my main subject, life sciences. IGNOU conducts contact classes for its students at the study centre every few months. After attending a couple of them, I found that they were not really useful to me since they covered only the very basics of the course material.

Every year, I could opt for a maximum of 32 credits. The credits for a course were awarded only after successful completion of assignments and the term-end examination. Assignments had 30% weightage and the term-end examination, 70%. Each term consisted of six months and I sat for the term-end exams twice a year - in June and December. During the end of each term I applied for the subjects I intended to study for the next term so that the study material would arrive on time. Though there was the flexibility of completing the bachelor's programme between three to six years, I aimed at finishing it in three.

I chose to do several modules in the life sciences — cell biology, development biology, ecology, physiology, biochemistry, taxonomy and evolution, human environment. The other science modules I studied were mechanics, oscillations and waves, atoms and molecules, inorganic chemistry and mathematical methods. It was mandatory for a student of life sciences to carry out a project as a part of the human environment module, an application-oriented course, in the final semester.

The study material was excellent; the rate at which it came was not. Assignments always assumed top priority in my mind because they were as important in obtaining credits as the term-end exam itself. I worked on them regularly with great effort, but the pace at which they were graded and at which the marks were sent to the Delhi head office was very slow. Sometimes my assignment marks would come long after I had finished writing the term-end examinations!

I would often go to the college IGNOU office and rummage through the assignment papers hoping to find my assignments graded, and sometimes to even pursue the office staff to send the marks to Delhi on time. Many students usually overshot the submission deadlines by several months and hence the lecturers too never considered grading assignments on time. I sometimes met and spoke to the lecturers personally pleading with them to grade my assignments soon, since it was impinging on my final result. Fortunately, many of them were very supportive and helpful. But there were trying times too. Once during the final semester, I stubbornly sat waiting outside the office the entire day to meet a professor who had to grade one of my assignments!

No science is complete without laboratory work. In IGNOU too, we had compulsory laboratory classes to be taken along with the theory subjects. Out of the total elective credits that a student chose for the main subject, 25% had to be from laboratory courses.

Lab classes were usually conducted during weekends at the study centre when the regular college was officially closed or sometimes continuously for one or two weeks during the college vacations. Attendance was a must. Our study centre was reasonably well equipped and most of the experiments were conducted properly and evaluated individually. Most importantly, this was my opportunity to be a part of a classroom atmosphere once again, and I thoroughly enjoyed it.

Most of my batch mates were in my age group, while a few were older. All of them were employed, mostly as lab technicians. We were an interesting group and had lots of fun together, both during classes and during the lunch break. They nicknamed me *maami* for the un-fail-ing regularity with which I brought curd rice everyday! We nicknamed our professors too. There was one professor who used everyday examples - for instance, the weight of vegetables like the brinjal - to explain concepts in chemistry like molality and molarity. We fondly called him '*Kathrikka Sir*(Brinjal Sir).

My professors often wondered why I was doing my degree through correspondence. The first question that they invariably asked was, '*Enga work panringa?* (Where do you work?) When I told them that I didn't have a job but was in the PHE programme, they saw it all as the futile fantasy of a well-to-do girl.

What I really feared was dissection. Luckily for me, we had a professor who didn't fancy dissection either and showed us all specimens on prepared slides, except for one experiment where we had to cut up a cockroach. My friends were very confident when it came to handling chemicals and equipment since most of them were laboratory technicians, whereas I was new and nervous. They would suck out acids with a pipette, as if they were sipping coconut water!

One of the most important things I learnt while doing a correspondence degree was how to study by myself. Looking back, I think I enjoyed every bit of this experience. On every page of the book there was something new to discover. The study material was at par, if not better than regular B. Sc. programmes. The content was comprehensive and I rarely needed to refer to other books to understand concepts. Good study material combined with self-study gave me tremendous self-confidence, satisfaction and thoroughness in my subject.

But studying on my own did not come easily. This was due to a total lack of training in self-learning in our schools. Normally in class, while listening to a teacher explaining a

concept, the student registers the content only partly and almost always, passively. After the class, it is just a matter of recollecting what the teacher taught and of memorizing the content for the examinations. In my case, I was both teacher and student. The teacher in me first prepared herself by reading the material once to understand the content to explain it to the student. Then the student took over, re-read what was explained, tried to visualize the concept if possible, asked some more questions and made notes in simpler terms to make the concept easy to remember. The double-role, though exhausting, was immensely satisfying.

Some subjects like biochemistry, physics and mathematics were very difficult for me, and I had to take the help of family friends and teachers at the School. I spoke to them about helping me out and regularly went to their homes for classes when studying those modules. They helped improve my understanding of the subject and I even managed to get a reasonably good grade. While I tried to study for an hour everyday, it was only one or two months before the examination that I would dive headlong into the subjects, studying for up to eight or ten hours a day. My examinations were usually after the holidays, so I always ended up studying when I went to my village during the vacations. Summer, *Dasara*, *Deepavali* holidays - for me, all these proved to be working days.

The final semester of my three-year degree programme arrived and I needed to work on a project as a part of the human environment module. Since I was already working in the field of weaving and textiles for the past three years, I decided to do a project that related specifically to textiles, probably something on the effect of textile dye effluents on the environment.

But how did I get started? First of all, I needed a lab facility and someone to guide me. Raji aunty and Krishnan uncle suggested that I enquire at the AMM Murugappa Chettiar Research Centre which is located in Taramani, Chennai. The Founder-Director of this Centre was none other than the famous scientist, (late) Shri C.V. Seshadri, who was known for his scientific innovations in the rural sector. I had met him briefly once as a student about five years earlier. Though he was no more, I decided to meet MCRC's new director and try my luck.

I was thrilled when my request was entertained. The director not only gave me permission to use the lab, but also introduced me to Dr Perumal, a research scientist, to guide me and help develop my project. Since the MCRC was cycling distance from our house in Tiruvanmiyur, I could commute easily everyday.

On the first day, I explained my textile interests to Dr. Perumal. After some discussion, he suggested that apart from studying the effects of dye effluents on the environment, I could do some experiments on the treatment of these effluents using alum. He helped me develop a methodology for the purpose. I used the centre's library to study the theory and took notes. We decided to test dye effluent samples from a few textile units and to compare the biological oxygen demand (BOD) levels, odour and colour residues before and after treating the effluent with alum. But the real challenge now was — who would give me some effluents? Dr. Perumal gave me leads to some textile units in Ambattur and said I should try there.

I remember vividly the hot afternoon when I took a bus to the Ambattur industrial estate which is located at the other end of the city. I started enquiring and finally reached the textile unit I was looking for and asked to meet the person-in-charge. While I

explained my objectives, she glanced at my project papers and said, 'Oh, we actually treat our effluents. So it might not be useful.' I said I desperately needed effluents and it was okay to have even treated ones. 'What is the guarantee that you will not share the results of the study with some officials?' she asked again. I explained to her that it was just a student project and nothing more. She asked me a few more questions and finally told her assistant to get some effluents for me in a can. As I thanked her profusely and took her leave, she said, 'Can you share your findings with me?' I nodded and walked away elated with the coloured, toxic water in my hands, as if it were nectar. Yes, I had done it!

Back at the lab, Dr. Perumal put me in touch with one of his research assistants to help me with the experiments. Just as I was wondering how I could get effluents from another unit, the assistant offered to bring some from a unit he knew. That was all I needed. He started guiding me through my experiments and soon we had analyzed all the samples. I prepared the report and got it signed by Dr. Perumal and submitted the report to IGNOU in time. The entire exercise took about two months.

Finally it was December, and I was going to write the last set of term-end examinations. Every semester, by an appropriate date, each student would have to send an examination application form with a list of the subjects in which she sought to be examined. If the form was not sent, I could not write the examination for that term and would have to wait for another six months before the opportunity came by again.

It was *Deepavali* time, October 2000. I was busy preparing for the final set of courses. That December would be the end of examination headaches!

I am told that Alyque Padamsee, the advertising guru, before he launched the Liril soap advertisement, conducted a market survey which revealed that Indian women are most relaxed when in their bathroom. So the Liril advertisement cashed in on this total sense of freedom that a woman experiences in the bathroom. It's perhaps true. It sometimes really works better than the bedroom for relaxing the mind and for thinking calmly.

That day, just as I was finishing my bath, a chill ran down my spine. I shivered as something crossed my mind. My God! I had not despatched my examination application form! That form was essential for me to appear for the examinations and all this while I had been preparing for them!

I rushed out of the bathroom and informed my parents. I panicked. Oh God! Not another 6-months' wait for the wretched exams! I broke down. My parents' attempts to console and comfort me fell on deaf ears and tearful eyes. According to my calculations the final date even for late submission (usually up to fifteen days after the last date) had probably passed. I gave hell to everyone in the house and made Deepavali miserable for all. Early next morning, I left by the first bus for Chennai along with my mother - I desperately needed her moral support - to see if something could be done. Surely there was a way... perhaps we could request them once again.... pay a little more fine... something had to be done!

The minute I reached my residence in Chennai, I rummaged wildly through the prospectus to check the date for late submissions. My blood was pounding in my head. And then I saw it. My heart skipped a beat... I had two days left! It was like Yama

postponing my death by another forty-eight hours! I could not help thinking that such slips do not occur in a regular college situation where there are friends and teachers to remind you.

I finally wrote all my examinations in December and slowly got over that deadly month. The examination was not all smooth sailing. My mathematics paper was hopeless. I just needed to pass, that would be more than enough.

Since my PHE was coming to an end and so was my study for an IGNOU degree, I decided to apply for a postgraduate programme in textile design and development at the National Institute of Fashion Technology (NIFT). While I appeared for the admission test, I still had the nagging doubt in my mind — would I pass the B. Sc. math examination?

I did! I just scraped through. I have never been so happy at having got such poor marks. It is amazing that those poor, all time low marks gave me greater relief than all the good ranks I used to get in school. My aggregate for the B. Sc life sciences examination as a whole was 75%.

The story is not yet over. Even after I joined a postgraduate programme, I kept getting various letters from IGNOU on various matters. I was quite bored seeing the same white IGNOU envelope with my typed name and address peeping out through the transparent film. One day an additional IGNOU envelope arrived and I ignored it as well. My cousin, in his usual playful manner, tore open the envelope and started reading its contents aloud. I was working on a project and I thought I heard something... but it couldn't be true, it just couldn't be true! I snatched the letter from him and read it myself. It said:



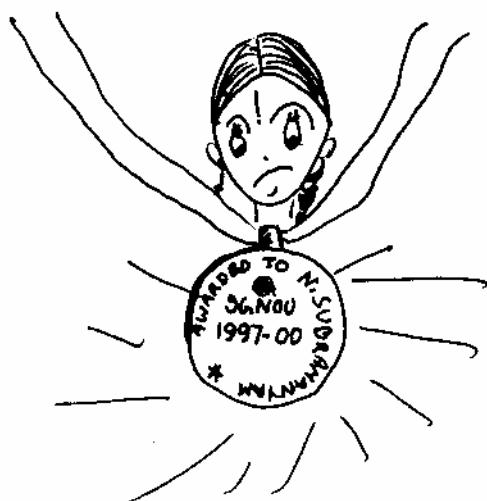
'We are happy to inform that you have been recommended for the gold medal for the year 2000 for successfully completing your Bachelor's degree in Life Sciences and standing first...'

How could I... ?

I could not attend the IGNOU convocation ceremony since my postgraduate programme classes had already commenced. During my vacation, however, I went to the IGNOU regional office to collect my medal. The assistant director was a familiar face. I had approached him for all my previous problems, including getting my study centre changed and this time too he probably expected me to tell him of some more. When I

informed him of the purpose of my visit, he was extremely delighted, made a couple of phone calls and asked for the medal and the certificate to be brought over.

The medal arrived. I looked at it. *It appeared to be mocking me!* On it was inscribed 'Subramanian'. 'Subramanian?' I asked, almost on the verge of tears. Had there been a mistake... did I get the medal at all?



THE MEDAL WAS MOCKING AT ME!

The Assistant Director looked carefully at the medal and then said, 'We are extremely sorry, Ms. Samyuktha. The medals have got exchanged. We... er... seem to have given Mr. Subramanian your medal. We will contact him and get it back. . . he stays in T. Nagar. Sorry about all this. You take the certificate now, and we will send the medal by courier.

'No, not by courier,' I said hastily. I was not prepared to lose the medal again and listen to another round of apologies. 'Please send it with my mother. She will be coming to Chennai next week. I will give her an authorization letter,' I said, as I walked out of the office.

What an adventure that was!

When my younger sister was considering her options after completing her class **XII**, my mother remarked, 'Why don't you too do your degree with IGNOU? You could get a gold medal too!'

7 What next?

After three and a half years of my exploratory programme, it was time for another brainstorming session.

The million-dollar question was: *What next?*

My first preference was textiles. I wanted to explore the design dimension as it was not only something that I was interested in and felt capable of doing but it would also benefit the weaver community. But where could I pursue an education in textile design?

The two institutions offering textile design programmes were the National Institute of Design (NID) at Ahmedabad and the National Institute of Fashion Technology (NIFT). A third suggestion was that I should take up a design course abroad. But I was not eligible for a postgraduate programme after a 3-year undergraduate degree. A couple of universities responded to my suggestion that I join their undergraduate programme instead. This did not appeal to me. I did not want to redo undergraduate study, so the option of studying abroad was out.

The second option was to continue with regular academic study and get a Masters. Uzramma was keen that I pursue a Masters Degree in the Social Sciences, to 'broaden and nurture' my intellect in a university atmosphere. 'Design can be learnt any time, Samyuktha,' she advised. 'What is now necessary for you is that you do a focussed study in the social sciences that will build good rigour and the ability to think analytically and systematically about issues? A good university education will give you that.' My father, being a sociologist himself, understood Uzramma's perspective; in fact, he had always wanted me to pursue history or sociology... or homeopathy, for that matter! But he felt that ultimately I had to enjoy whatever I did — that was the bottom-line as far as he was concerned.

I decided to keep both the options going for a while — although I was definitely more inclined towards textile design than further academic studies in science or social science. I therefore applied to both NID and NIFT for admission to their textile design programmes and to the Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, for admission to a Masters Degree in Life Sciences.

My application was not accepted at the NID since I did not have a Bachelor's degree in a textile-related course and I was not willing to join a fresh four-year undergraduate programme. Since that left only the NIFT option — if I was serious about a textile design career — I started on a coaching schedule to brush up my math and analytical skills. Since the JNU entrance examination came much later, I first decided to concentrate entirely on the written NIFT test.

The NIFT test finally did get over, but I did not perform as well as I had expected to. Fortunately, soon after I started preparing for the JNU exam, I received the NIFT entrance results - I had gotten through the written entrance exam! That was a great relief, but now there were two more critical stages before I could be finally admitted.

'What if I didn't get selected?'

Since that doubt still remained to some extent, I started preparing mentally to associate with institutions like Dastkar Andhra or some free-lance textile designer to continue to be able to pursue my textile interest whether I got admission into a regular college or not. It was a time for emotional turmoil once again with lots of 'ifs and buts', but some open discussions with my parents and their constant support and strength made things easier for me. I did continue to prepare for the JNU entrance exam, albeit half-heartedly.

I was soon called for the 'situation test' at NIFT, New Delhi - the second stage of admission. In the 'situation test' each candidate is handed a few basic materials like a paper cup and plate, some paper, glue, scissors and drinking straws with which she has to fabricate either a Miss World crown or a World Peace cup. We were also asked to sketch a still-life *ensemble* that was on display, each of us viewing it from a different position.

Then came the interview. Thinking that I would now have an opportunity to share all my weaving work and samples from the previous three years, I showed up at the interview well equipped. But what happened was totally different.

Since my resume had indicated that one of my interests was theatre, one interviewer asked me to imitate Jayalalitha - the film heroine-turned-Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu; another asked me to relate a joke. I am really bad at telling jokes and could not think of a good one at the moment so I simply narrated a funny incident that had happened to me recently. Apart from a sprinkling of questions related to textiles, I had still not got an opportunity to show or talk about my work in weaving. As I was wondering if I should bring it up myself, one of the panellists finally asked: 'Do you want to do any subject other than textile design as a second option?'

I was shocked. Was my interview over? So far, they had seen only my theatre antics! They can't do this to me. 'But...', I stammered.

'Well, we have already decided in the negative, so if there is any other course you want to do at NIFT — accessory design, leather, knitwear...?' the interviewer looked at me again.

'No, thank you, I said, very firmly. I want to do only textiles design.' Inside, I was really angry and fuming.

'What will you do now?' another panellist asked. 'Do you have any other option?'

'Well, I had applied to NID, and was not accepted because I didn't have the prerequisite degree in a textile-related subject,' I replied. I might work with a textile designer. I'll think of some options, but I will do textile design. Thank you.'

I stormed out with a plastic smile so huge it would have rivalled those worn habitually by participants of beauty contests. Strangely, though I was convinced that I stood absolutely no chance, the rest of the world thought just the opposite. And they proved to be right after all.

Just a couple of days before my JNU examination date, I received positive news from the NIFT regarding my admission to the textile degree programme! I was thrilled. But I still went ahead and appeared for the JNU test. I did not get through however.

In July 2000, I was part of the first batch that enrolled for the two and a half year Textile Design programme at NIFT, Hyderabad, which would result in a postgraduate diploma. NIFT was totally different from the world I knew. It was the fashionable, 'hep' place in town and my first encounter with college life.

I found the course very exciting and looked forward to attending my classes everyday. As we were the first batch, there were some teething problems. But that had its own advantages. In a few months I was very much at ease with my classmates. Looking back now, I can admit that education at NIFT did have its shortcomings, like with any other institution. But what was important for me was to take the best of what it had to offer. With that positive attitude it was fairly easy for me to go ahead with the course. I managed to do quite well and eventually won the award for academic excellence from the Hyderabad centre!

8 Making it all possible

Home Supporting Home

From the moment I decided to try out a different path, the support I received from my parents, especially from my mother, has been most crucial. They were a part of my decision-making through all the ups and downs I faced, and the principal source of my strength and confidence. It was always reassuring to think, ‘Yes, my parents are *with* me in this.’

In all the practical aspects of my daily life, the biggest contribution came from the family with whom I lived during the three and a half years of my study, especially from the very special person that is Raji aunty. She was always there for me, physically, emotionally and in spirit.

She just had to ask me after I came back from school, ‘So, what hap-pened today?’ and I would chatter on endlessly, about what happened at the weaving and art classes, how I almost fell off the cycle, how tasteless the *sambar* rice was at school and how delicious her *rasam* preparation was in contrast. Raji Aunty would nod and listen to me, with an occa-sional ‘hmm... *Appadiya?* (Is that so?) as she worked in the kitchen. She had to face two chatter sessions every day — one from me and another from her daughter Aarya, who would walk up and down the kitchen and tell her all the answers to all the questions in all her school subjects, from history to biology to Tamil.

Aarya would sometimes come to me with questions in chemistry or biology. We often went to music class together, walking side by side, while I did most of the talking. She was very affectionate and shared whatever she got with me. Her articles, essays and stories were brilliant and I admired her writing skills while she read out her pieces to her mother in the kitchen.

Whenever visitors came to our house, Raji aunty always introduced me to them saying, “This is Samyuktha, our friend’s daughter. She is doing something different for her education.’ From there on, I would take the lead and explain to them what I was doing instead of merely going to college. Within a couple of months, thanks to these numerous introduc-tions, I had acquired the skill of ‘reciting’ the entire programme in about twelve minutes flat! There were always mixed responses from people to my story. Some thought it was exciting. Some simply nodded uncertainly. Some thought it was interesting and a few perhaps even thought I was wasting my time.

In such circumstances, Raji aunty and Deva aunty would soon come to my support. ‘You know she went to the Narmada valley last month...’, ‘...and look at this towel she has woven for us with her own hands.’ These statements they would say with earnestness and a great deal of pride.

To Raji and Deva auntie and my parents, I didn’t need to prove anything. Their confidence in me was enough proof that I was doing all right.

Money matters

People often ask me how much it cost doing what I did and whether the School charged me any fees. Here is a peek into the accounts department.

The School did not accept any fees for the programme and told me up front that any financial arrangements were left to me and my teachers. It was also quite generous of the School authorities to provide lunch free of charge. I was simply told, ‘You are just one extra person.. .we cook for everyone anyway.’

As it happened, most of the teachers whom I chose to work with were part of the School as salaried instructors and refused to accept any personal fee from me. This was especially true of my art teacher, Tarit *anna* and my weaving master, Shankaran *anna*. For my dance classes, I did pay a monthly fee of about 200 rupees, while my music classes were free since my teacher’s policy was not to make money from teaching music. My interaction with Mr. Natarajan, the origami teacher was for about three weeks; again, he too did not charge me anything. The entire Chennur episode was *gratis* because my host Sathyaranayananagaru refused to treat me as a ‘paying’ guest and so did Odhanna and his family, poor as they were, from whom I learnt weaving. The IGNOU annual fee was about Rs.1200, which included the costs of the study material. All travel expenses came from my pocket money.

In all these circumstances, I offered my ‘fees’ in kind, rather than in cash. It could be something I had woven, painted or crafted; new clothes for festivals; or agricultural produce from our village farm.

I have often asked myself: Is this way of pursuing higher education really an ‘alternative’ for a student irrespective of her social and economic background? Or was I able to do this just because most of my teachers didn’t charge any fees?

Speaking for myself, I would certainly have completed this programme even if it had involved higher expenses and fees. After all, when I took this path, I did not know who my teachers would be or what their charges would be. Of course, it helped that I had the backing of my parents who thought that there might be better ways of spending money on educating their daughter than forcing her into a routine college programme.

In the end, the financial requirements of this exploration of higher education appeared to be comparable to the regular college degree programmes. If anything, they were lower. Just as there is variation among the various college degree courses and their costs, here too it would depend on what areas one would like to pursue, how and from whom. It would depend on the relationship you were able to build with your teacher and your surroundings.

Today, I certainly believe that this is a very affordable route at least for the young people of the middle class to which I belong. “The more significant question is whether we would actually venture along the exploratory path of higher learning; even when we were financially able to afford it.

The end and the beginning

If a student takes a year off between high school and college to explore, does it mean she has ‘wasted one year’? Does it mean he or she risks falling one year behind others of their age group? The common anxiety among Indian students and parents (which I partly shared), appears to provide a ready answer even without asking - ‘Yes, of course!’ I see now that this anxiety is quite misplaced.

Firstly, true exploration is not the same as whiling away one's time. It is, in fact, using time more consciously and efficiently to pursue one's keener interests. Perhaps our school system has made us so dependent on class schedules and course programmes handed out on a platter that, without them, we are at a loss to know how to organize our time. This is a significant life-skill I learnt during those years.

Importantly, this brought me in tryst with something that changed me and my life, not just in terms of ending up with a fulfilling career, but in many other intangible ways. If I had gone to regular college, I would perhaps never have tried my hand at weaving. Neither might I have discovered my love for textiles and the weaver community. When I stepped back into the mainstream, by enrolling for the textile design programme in NIFT, I was already convinced that this work was the love of my life and not just a course for which I happened to qualify now through an entrance examination.

Looking back, I see that what I did in those years was in effect a series of apprenticeships, with an in-built freedom to choose different areas. In fact, apprenticeship with a mentor has been the natural way for young people to learn their livelihood skills for centuries - for carpenters, farmers, painters, writers, scientists, shopkeepers, engineers, business-people, and of course weavers! In fact, it finds place even in today's colleges in the form of 'internships', 'practical training' or 'project' requirement, though even these are again being increasingly dominated by coursework and classroom study. I, for one, thoroughly enjoyed taking the apprenticeship route guided by very good mentors.

The three and a half years of my higher education included experiences and people that I hold most precious. Of course, one can always argue that such experiences are not specific to this kind of unconventional education and they could happen elsewhere.

There were also those seemingly unimportant 'first time' things - like booking a railway ticket, travelling alone by train, speaking to a group of strangers on a social issue - that gave me a lot of confidence in myself.

Still, if I were to ask myself, 'Hey, so what did you *really* learn?' the answers fall beautifully in my lap, like some angelic leaves from heaven.

First of all, this kind of learning gave me a sense of independence and confidence - that I could take charge not only of the task of educating myself, but also of organizing my time in ways that I could enjoy, appreciate and value.

Second, my higher education became so integrated with my life and personality that I no longer saw them as separate or distinct. Learning became a part of everyday routine and was no longer necessarily restricted to a particular course or classroom. Constant interaction with different kinds of people from various cultures and backgrounds added tremendously to my learning and perspective, sometimes in subtle ways.

Third, there was a lot of freedom in this programme - yet one needed to develop a sense of direction, commitment and willingness to put one's energy and soul in one's work and develop the ability to be able to step back and watch where the direction eventually led you. This was most challenging when I was doing the PHE and it continues to be a challenge in all the things I do today.

The angels must be smiling and so am I.

Glossary

Abhinaya: The dramatic art of dance; a language of gestures, poses and mime.

Adavu: The basic rhythmic body movements and hand gestures, combinations of which are put together to form dance sequences.

Alapana: An improvisational melodic sketch of the *raga* - untied to any composition or rhythm; an aural painting of the *raga*, bringing out its characteristics.

Alarippu: One of the first presentations in a dance concert which is an invocation to the gods to bless the performance; the movements are performed to dance syllables set to a particular beat or 'tala'.

Ashram: Hindu hermitage where sages and their disciples lived in peace amidst nature and devoted themselves primarily to spiritual pursuits and teaching.

Bhajan: Devotional song set to simple music which is often sung in a group.

Bharat Natyam: Classical form of Indian dance.

Brocade: A class of richly decorated shuttle-woven fabrics often made in coloured silks and patterned with gold and silver threads.

Bobbin: Spool on which warp thread is wound before it is mounted on the loom.

Charkha: A hand-spinning wheel for making yarn from a fibre such as wool or cotton.

Carnatic: A form of classical Indian music.

Dasara: Also called 'Navaratri', among one of the most important Hindu festivals.

Dhobi: Washerman.

Dhoti: A rectangular piece of unstitched cloth wrapped about the waist and the legs; a popular male garment in India.

Dobby: A mechanical attachment on the loom, used for weaving slightly complex designs.

Geetam: Classical songs which are among the first set that a student is taught after he/she learns the basic fundamentals of Carnatic classical music.

Ghatam: An earthenware pot used as a percussion instrument in Carnatic music. The artiste uses the fingers, thumb, palm and heel of the hands on the outer surface of the *ghatam*.

Ghat: Series of steps leading down to a body of water.

Guru: Teacher

Gurukula: The ancient Indian form of residential school where the *guru* (the teacher) and the students lived together and education encompassed all aspects of living.

Jacquard: Mechanical attachment on the loom, invented by Joseph Marie Jacquard in 1801, which used the holes punched in pasteboard punch cards to control the weaving of very complex patterns in fabric.

Jati: Different combinations of *adavus* (basic dance movements) set to a particular rhythm and *tala*.

Jatisvaram: Dance composition set to *swaras* (notes) in a particular *raga* with no lyrics.

Karthika Pournami: Hindu festival that falls on a full-moon day in November and is celebrated by the lighting of lamps.

Kalpana Swarams: *Extempore* rendering of combinations of *swaras* (notes) set to a particular *raga*, forming part of the performance of a

kriti - usually after completing the lyric.

Kanjira (also known as *ganjira*): A South Indian frame drum which is an instrument of the tambourine family, used as a percussion instrument.

Khadi: Indian hand-spun and hand-woven cotton cloth.

Kriti: A format of Carnatic musical composition. It generally consists of three sections pallavi, anupaliavi and charana and forms the backbone of any music concert.

Kurta: A traditional Indian garment, it is a loose shirt that reaches either just above or below the knee, and is worn by both men and women.

Loom: Machine or device for weaving yarn into cloth.

Lungi: A garment worn around the waist in India, normally woven in cotton with a variety of designs and colours — the most popular styles are either solid-coloured or plaid.

Macramé: A form of textile-making that uses knotting rather than weaving or knitting. Common materials used include cotton twine, hemp and leather.

Mami: Colloquial in Tamil for ‘aunt’, not necessarily by relation.

Mridangam: Barrel-shaped drum-like percussion instrument from south India, usually one of the accompaniments in a Carnatic vocal or instrumental concert.

Paliu: The end piece of a saree, usually with more elaborate patterning.

Pirn: A small carrot-shaped device on which weft yarn is wound. It is then put into the shuttle and woven as weft when the shuttle moves to and fro across the warp.

Pitloom: One of the traditional and most widely-used looms in India placed over a pit dug into the ground. The weaver sits on the floor level with the frame, with his or her legs in the pit to operate the pedals of the loom.

Saga: A musical entity in Indian classic music with a defined pair of ascending and descending set of *swaras* (notes). Permutations and combinations of these notes are used within a set of rules for building the melody in a musical composition. Indian classical music consists of a variety of *ragas*.

Rasika: A connoisseur of music.

Rudraksh: A seed (*Elacocarpus ganitrus*) that is usually strung to make a rosary and used by Hindus, especially devotees of Shiva, while chanting and praying.

Sabha: An assembly where cultural programmes are performed.

Shuttle: A device used to weave the weft by passing it back and forth between the threads of the warp.

Sliver: A hunk of cleaned fibre that is used for spinning into yarn.

Spindle: A wooden spike weighted at one end with a circular whorl used for spinning wool and other fibres into thread.

Swara: A note in Indian classical music. The seven swaras are denoted by *Sa, Ri (Re* in Hindustani), *Ga, Ma, Pa, Da (Dha* in Hindustani) and *Ni*.

Takli: A traditional drop-spindle and one of the earliest instruments used to spin yarn from cotton or wool fibre.

Talam: Rhythmical pattern in Indian classical music that defines the rhythmic structure of a composition. Each composition is set to a specific talam.

Tambura: A long-necked Indian lute, unfretted and round-bodied. It is plucked to maintain the pitch for the vocalist or the instrumentalist.

Tapovanam: A forest (*vanam*) used by sages to perform penance (*tapasya*), or more generally, as a spiritual retreat.

Thani avarthanam: The section of a concert reserved for percussionists to perform complex patterns of rhythm and display their skill.

Tussar: A type of 'wild' silk which is coarser than mulberry silk.

Warp: The yarn that is placed lengthwise in the loom and which determines the length of a cloth.

Weft: The yarn that is interlaced with the warp in the horizontal direction to weave the cloth.

Zari: A type of thread traditionally made of fine gold or silver and woven along with silk to create rich patterned silk textiles.

Acknowledgements

If one has to author a book at the age of 24, one must have either a very imaginative mind to think of characters and situations, a beautiful style or a good command over the language. Or one must have accomplished something that's worth writing about and sharing with people. After I wrote this book, I feel that it is the people who figure in its pages that have made me worthy of writing it. I acknowledge all those who inspired me and enriched these pages with their experiences and interactions, sometimes in unseen and unexplainable ways. My parents deserve a special mention for having initiated even thinking about such an option in the first place and for helping me overcome practical and emotional hurdles.

When I first started off with my programme, it was Claude Alvares, editor at Other India Press (OIP) and family friend who insisted that I maintain my diary regularly so that I could later write a book of my experiences that might be useful to students of that crucial age group. I thank him for his suggestion.

An amateur writer like me needed the help of good editors. Norma Alvares of OIP and my friend, Aravinda Pillalamarri, gave me many crucial inputs to strengthen the content

and language. Kiran, my loving husband, assumed the role of the most critical editor, asking probing questions about how exactly I had felt at the different times and events described in its pages. After editing the book, he perhaps feels as if he was with me, right there, during all those four tumultuous years!

There is one little story that I would like to share with my readers. I specially owe the writing of this book to a very important person - my father. A diary I did maintain. It was, however, disposed off to the newspaper *walla* - just when I was contemplating writing this book - by none other than my loving father! Struck by guilt, he got after me to insist that I write the book nonetheless from what was still in my memory before I forgot it all. After the first draft of the book was ready, I showed it to him. Soon thereafter I got a phone call from him saying he had found my diaries and if I wanted to refer to them now, he could send them all across by courier. I was thrilled - better late than never. However, when the courier arrived, it turned out that the parcel contained just two of the six notebooks that I had maintained as diaries!

Perhaps he did all this to ensure that I would give him a special mention on this acknowledgement page!

END